

DEFINING A WAVE? THE VISUAL CULTURE AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES OF
FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

by

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ABSTRACT

What defines a wave? This question encapsulates the difficulty of defining something both fluid and active. In response, this thesis focusses on the messiness, contradictions and entanglements of fourth wave feminism, offering a more complex and nuanced understanding of this feminist temporality in opposition to reductive and simplified definitions. I go beyond existing scholarship on fourth wave feminism to examine how the fourth wave is constituted in relation to three intersecting and overlapping areas: social media; visual and artistic practices; and its relationship to previous waves, especially second wave feminism. I resist oppositional framings of feminist waves by focussing on the overlaps, convergences, (dis)continuities and connections between artworks from supposedly opposing feminist waves. Indeed, this thesis analyses feminist art and visual culture in order to challenge oppositional and linear framings of feminist waves due to the ways in which contemporary feminist artists draw on, rework and are shaped by earlier feminist tactics and traditions.

The intergenerational comparative analyses in this thesis are framed by three core modes, each of which forms the basis of a substantive chapter: speaking out against sexual violence; “reclaiming” the body and (in)visibilities; and the use of humour and subversion. My original methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism provides a flexible framework with an art historical grounding that is appropriate for analysing this material. Moreover, by comparing case studies from the fourth wave and previous waves, this thesis also intervenes into a live and reactive movement and draws out what lessons can be learnt to benefit contemporary feminist discourse and praxis and sustain it for the future. Overall, by analysing the

connections and (dis)continuities between visual culture and artistic practices of the second and fourth waves, this thesis contributes to the understanding of fourth wave feminism, thus challenging misconceptions about contemporary feminism and oppositional and linear framings of feminist waves.

DEDICATION

To my mum, my feminist inspiration and the strongest woman I know.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2016 Hannah Hill created and shared to social media perhaps the first example of viral embroidery (fig. 1). The work reads “when you remember that historically, embroidery hasn’t been taken seriously as a medium because it’s ‘women’s work’” and depicts a clenched fist holding onto a needle and thread, thereby showing an awareness of and anger towards the undermining and dismissal of women’s labour, whilst continuing the feminist tradition of reclaiming craft. Furthermore, it draws on a visual language that is suitable for social media by utilising the format of a meme and reappropriating an image from the animated series, *Arthur*. Consequently, the work facilitates community-building via digital networked technologies and evokes collective shared feminist laughter in response to the recognition of shared experiences and recognisable imagery. This example encapsulates the ways in which fourth wave feminist visual culture and artistic practices draw on and rework longer feminist traditions and tactics, whilst responding to and being shaped by contemporary contextual factors, as I demonstrate in this thesis.



Fig. 1 Hannah Hill, 2016, embroidery shared to social media.

Definitions of fourth wave feminism are often reductive and simplistic. For example, feminist podcaster Deborah Frances-White argues that “fourth-wave feminism is like the third wave [which she defines solely by its embrace of intersectionality] but with added Twitter and podcasts”.¹ Not only is this an oversimplification of the fourth wave, but it also positions it as merely an extension of the third wave and in opposition to earlier waves, by defining it by what they supposedly lacked (social media and intersectionality).² The fourth wave cannot be defined by a mode of activism nor a singular ideology, nor by its supposed opposition to earlier waves. Therefore, this thesis challenges such framings by analysing the visual culture and artistic practices of fourth wave feminism which have been neglected, drawing on overlooked comparisons with artworks from earlier waves, predominantly the second. By focussing on the fourth wave’s visual and artistic practices I can explore the fourth wave’s visual, art historical and activist connections to and overlaps with previous feminist waves and feminist traditions and tactics which the fourth wave draws upon, reworks and is shaped by. These include, but are not limited to: consciousness-raising, alternative spaces, reclamation, appropriation and subversion, all of which are beneficial to be understood through an art historical framing. This allows me to offer a more complex and nuanced perspective of the fourth wave, whilst challenging the perception that the second and fourth waves are opposites and that the relationship between the two is entirely hostile and

¹ Frances-White 2018, p. 9. However, Frances-White also proposes the existence of a fifth wave, which she maintains is about action, with events like #MeToo and Time’s Up and times of political unrest, aiming to create systemic change and transform hashtags into consequences for perpetrators (2018, p. 10).

² Intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article ‘Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics’ and later developed in 1991 in ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women’. Intersectionality describes the ways in which categories of identity, like race and gender, intersect to create unique and compounded experiences and subordination, thus rejecting a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw 1989, p. 140).

antagonistic. My approach accounts for the overlaps, divergences and messiness of feminist waves, as I complicate and reconceptualise the wave metaphor with an understanding of its limitations. I am not seeking to provide a singular definition or definitive account of fourth wave feminism but rather to explore its complexities and contradictions, as well as how it is constituted in relation to three intersecting and overlapping areas: social media, artistic and visual practices and its relationship with the second wave.

This thesis has contemporary political value as it can contribute to the shape and direction of a movement in motion. Therefore, not only is my research a documentation and analysis of the fourth wave, but it also bears witness to the development and unfolding of this temporality, thus examining where the movement is and situating it for the purpose of intervening in a living and reactive movement. Cathryn Bailey argues that heralding a new wave is something that can only be done in retrospect, as one cannot determine the start of a new wave or the end of the previous wave in the contemporaneous moment.³ However, by carefully selecting significant moments and case studies, whilst simultaneously acknowledging that this is a context in a state of flux, I am able to capture the feeling of a particular moment. This resists the homogenisation and reduction of feminist waves that can often happen in retrospective analyses.⁴ Indeed, Prudence Chamberlain demonstrates that “unfolding feminist waves are instinctive, feeling and immediate, in ways that disappear as they become memorialised or post-rationalised”.⁵ Moreover, by conducting a

³ Bailey 1997, p. 18.

⁴ Chamberlain 2017, p. 37.

⁵ Chamberlain 2017, p. 36.

contemporaneous analysis of the fourth wave as it moves and unravels, I address the lack of extensive examination into the current unfolding and shape of the fourth wave.⁶

1.1 (Re)conceptualising the Wave Metaphor

I conceptualise a wave as a surge or resurgence from a large body of moving water, which once it loses momentum fades back into the same water, with a new wave beginning a distance from shore, before the previous has fully dissipated.⁷ Therefore, waves emerge from a shared collective space, using energy and momentum to push forward, which highlights the need to interrogate (dis)continuities and convergences across feminist waves.⁸ This builds on Nicola Rivers' argument that a possible solution that allows for portraying the strength of the feminist movement, as well as acknowledging the overlapping and divergences of waves and multiplicity of feminisms, is to envisage a wave that allows for movement and is constantly in flux.⁹ The wave rolls back as often as it rolls forward and gains strength from what it brings, rather than losing momentum from what is left behind.¹⁰ Despite criticisms of the wave metaphor as homogenising and oversimplifying, I utilise it and

⁶ Ealalsaid Munro attributes this failure to a generational and wave gap (2013, p. 24).

⁷ Certain feminist scholars argue for a reframing of the wave analogy to tackle its problems and limitations, for example Nancy A. Hewitt and radio waves (2012). Whilst I will remain with the dominant oceanic conceptualisation, certain reframings will inform my thinking. For example, Hewitt's reconceptualisation of the wave metaphor as radio waves centralises the coexistence of multiple, intersecting, conflicting and overlapping elements which comprise periods of activism, which will inform my consideration of contemporary feminisms.

⁸ I use the term (dis)continuities to account for both continuities and discontinuities across feminist waves, as well as the ways in which they can occur simultaneously and coexist.

⁹ Rivers 2017, p. 22.

¹⁰ Rivers 2017, p. 22.

advocate for its value in conceptualising feminist temporalities due to the ways it can account for movement, force, affectivity, messiness, overlaps and divergences.¹¹

Notably, the existence of the fourth wave has been identified by a number of scholars and commentators, with the term coming into use around 2009.¹² However, its existence, distinctiveness and significance remain contested. Notably, there is no singular defining moment which marks the start of the fourth wave and the end of the third; attributing a definitive start or end to a wave seems impossible and, in my view, possesses little value. The beginning of the third wave was asserted by feminists, for example Rebecca Walker in 'Becoming the Third Wave', whereas the existence of the fourth wave was identified by writers and commentators, perhaps due to the lack of identification with the wave metaphor amongst contemporary feminists.¹³ Despite this, I employ the wave metaphor in a way that provides a valuable framework for conceptualising feminist temporalities and understanding the relationship between feminist generations that is not linear nor familial. The debate and contestation surrounding what constitutes the fourth wave reflects its diverse, pluralistic, divergent, inconsistent and often contradictory nature, thus its resistance to simple definition and messiness becomes part of what defines the movement.¹⁴ It can be argued

¹¹ Some of the criticisms of the wave metaphor are that it: homogenises and simplifies feminist activism at any given point; neglects in-between periods of activity; coalesces extended time periods into a single wave (for example, the first wave is regarded as having spanned from the 1840s to the 1920s); focusses on the most visible groups, individuals, campaigns, ideologies, aims and strategies, overlooking the work of marginalised communities, and creates generational conflict. These criticisms are highlighted in: Cochrane 2013, pp. 43 and 48; Hewitt 2012, pp. 659 and 662-65; and Baumgardner 2011, p. 311.

¹² Early examples include Solomon 2009; Baumgardner 2011; Cochrane 2013; and Munro 2013.

¹³ Walker 1992. Notably, fourth wave feminists do not self-identify as such, unlike some third wave feminists and are more likely to identify by ideological frame, such as: Black; queer; intersectional; radical; and sex positive or are labelled by others, for example TERF (trans exclusionary radical feminist).

¹⁴ This idea is informed by Elizabeth Evans' conceptualisation of the third wave in 2015, pp. 4 and 19.

that there are in fact a number of fourth waves, with their fragmentations, multiplicities and continuities and divergences from previous waves reflecting this plurality, alongside the incorporation of a wide range of geographical, ideological, historical and contextual specificities, as well as their intersection with coexisting feminisms.¹⁵ Chamberlain maintains that:

It is necessary for a critical focus to be on a lack of definition; activists can recognise that a new surge of energy is emerging and developing, but not pin it to specific people, attitudes or activisms. This openness ensures that centres and margins are less apparently defined against one another, such that a multiplicity of narratives can co-exist within the emergence of a new wave.¹⁶

All of this is central to understanding the fourth wave as a complex and nuanced whole, with multiplicity and contradiction having the potential to enrich the entire movement, as highlighted by Bailey.¹⁷

The fourth wave cannot be defined by a single approach, ideology, tactic or political agenda and to assume so erases and homogenises the complexities of this diverse movement in focussing on the most dominant and visible positions of the wave. Indeed, Evans advocates that exploring contemporary feminism through a wave framework which encompasses diverse ideological positionings enables the consideration of points of continuity and avoids reductive interpretations and sweeping generalisations of feminist praxis.¹⁸ Moreover, the fourth wave is a temporality and does not refer to a self-identification label, a monolithic or homogenous identity, or age cohort. Therefore, there is a “co-existence of multi-

¹⁵ This is informed by Evans’ conceptualisation of the third wave in 2015, p. 4.

¹⁶ Chamberlain 2017, p. 37.

¹⁷ Bailey 1997, p. 26.

¹⁸ Evans 2015, pp. 197-99.

generational feminisms, all operating within the fourth-wave moment”.¹⁹ Whilst there is no evident impetus amongst fourth wavers to forge a monolithic identity, divisions and divergences have always been a central part of the feminist story. This idea is furthered by Evans who maintains that “neither the first nor second waves were monolithic, with divergent tactics, multiple foci and ideological differences guaranteeing a diverse movement. Thus, it is unsurprising that this third wave [and now fourth wave] has not coalesced into an easily definable movement”.²⁰

Through my complication of reductive definitions of the fourth wave and exploration of the overlaps and (dis)continuities across feminist waves, I challenge the perception that the fourth wave sits in opposition to and in conflict with the second. For example, I demonstrate how the supposed binaries that are often attributed to the second and fourth waves, such as offline versus online and collective versus individual, coexist within the fourth wave. This presents a more complex and nuanced view of the relationship between feminist waves and opens the possibility for intergenerational dialogue and collaboration. Points of continuity and divergence between the second and fourth waves alongside the media portrayal of intergenerational conflict, particularly between so-called “Millennial snowflakes” and “Baby Boomers”, show why I am focussing primarily on this relationship.²¹ In addition, the divide between second and fourth wave feminists is often overstated and sensationalised, particularly in relation to prominent issues, such as the sex industry, transgender rights,

¹⁹ Chamberlain 2017, p. 22.

²⁰ Evans 2015, p. 5.

²¹ Temporally, “Millennials” (born 1981 to 1996) would be active in the fourth wave, whereas “Baby Boomers” (born 1946 to 1964) could have been active during the second wave.

intersectionality and self-objectification, even though these divides are evident within generations and waves and are not strictly generational.²² Indeed, Rivers highlights that “rather than allowing for a difference in political opinions or accepting the multiplicity of feminist thought, differences between feminists, particularly when associated with differing waves, are reduced to a generational conflict of old vs new”, ignoring and devaluing pre-existing and established feminist debates and undermining the possibility of an intergenerational fourth wave.²³ This is exemplified by the media attention given to reactions against figures such as Germaine Greer and feuds between celebrities such as Miley Cyrus and Sinead O’Connor, which further casts debates surrounding transgender rights, empowerment, self-objectification and sexual exploitation as generational. Rivers demonstrates that such disagreements are met and amplified by the media seemingly with glee and amusement, with such differences co-opted into reinforcing the misogynistic portrayal of “catty” women and female relationships being competitive or domestic and familial.²⁴ I complicate the framing of feminist generations as linear familial successions, especially that which centres on the mother-daughter metaphor, which is problematic and has limitations.²⁵ Instead, in framing feminist temporalities as overlapping and intersecting, I trouble the perception that the relationship between the second and fourth waves is solely hostile and familial.

²² In reality, prominent second wave feminists are often heralded as role models and heroes for many fourth wavers, for example Gloria Steinem.

²³ Rivers 2017, pp. 32 and 48-50.

²⁴ Rivers 2017, pp. 50 and 151.

²⁵ Some of the problems of the mother-daughter metaphor are, but not limited to: that it centres on cisheteronormativity and excludes non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, transgender people, men and other female relationships; it plays on negative associations of the relationship between mothers and daughters; it relies on the idea of family legacy and thus does not extend past the familial; and it overlooks the work of feminists who cross multiple waves.

Rivers maintains that a complexification of the wave model is needed to understand waves as overlapping and operating simultaneously, rather than the arrival of a new wave signalling the disappearance or conclusion of what came before.²⁶ She conveys that, although generational and ideological differences are evident within waves, there is an overlapping of ideas and theories which originated in one wave but remain important and relevant during another, such as intersectionality, with various issues resurfacing in a cyclical fashion, which is apparent throughout my comparative analyses.²⁷ Rivers furthers this by arguing that:

Drawing attention to the multiple instances where these waves in fact overlap or converge (as waves do), is to reveal that apparent differences amongst contemporary feminists can as often be attributed to differing schools of feminist thought and political beliefs, as to apparently new waves of feminism superseding old.²⁸

Therefore, the wave metaphor can signify an overlapping of temporalities, accounting for multiplicity and division across and within waves which disrupts framings that convey waves as linear successions of generations.

Moreover, the narrative of an antagonistic relationship between feminist generations or waves relies on simplified, rigid and homogenised understandings of each wave.²⁹ It suggests that feminists hold a static position assigned to them because of their age, as opposed to allowing them to occupy multiple positions, crossing various waves or having disagreements due to political differences rather than generational divides.³⁰ Therefore, by complicating the

²⁶ Rivers 2017, pp. 20, 109 and 133.

²⁷ Rivers 2017, pp. 20-22.

²⁸ Rivers 2017, p. 133.

²⁹ Rivers 2017, p. 29.

³⁰ Rivers 2017, p. 29.

relationship that exists between the second and fourth waves, I challenge reductive and homogenised definitions of them. Furthermore, the emphasis on generation assumes a commonality of experience within each cohort that fails to accommodate differences influenced by intersectionality, such as race, class, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity.³¹ To resist the homogenisation of generations I incorporate intersectionality and contextual specificity into my analysis, whilst also exploring points of collectivity, connection, shared experience and community.

Through my intergenerational comparative analyses I challenge oppositional approaches to feminist waves in which the newness of a wave is heralded to highlight how its differences address the shortcomings of the previous wave with emphasis placed on the tension and conflict between the two waves.³² Despite the tendency to herald the newness of a nascent feminist wave, this does not necessarily mean the total disavowal of previous waves, as considerations of (dis)continuities can facilitate ongoing dialogue between the past and present.³³ Chamberlain maintains that “each temporality, while suggesting social change, is not calling for a total reinvention of feminism, just acknowledging that this incarnation must respond slightly differently to an altered context”.³⁴ In this sense, intergenerational dialogue and collaboration can enable current waves to understand, reflect on and learn from the knowledge and experience of previous waves to inform their discourse and praxis. This is furthered by Chamberlain who argues that “wave moments become a contemporary: a

³¹ Rivers 2017, p. 50.

³² Evans 2015, p. 23 gives a brief overview of the oppositional approach.

³³ Evans 2015, p. 36.

³⁴ Chamberlain 2017, p. 22.

simultaneity of unfolding activism within the moment, tempered through knowledge of the past and sustained by intent for the future”.³⁵

Feminist waves build on and are influenced by, rather than reject or erase, what has come before through their continuities and divergences, which goes some way to demonstrate the importance of the intergenerational comparisons which form a central part of my analysis.

Indeed, Jonathan Dean and Kristin Aune maintain that the notion of the wave suggests building on what has come before, as opposed to eradicating it, thereby challenging the perception that feminist waves erase previous feminist activism and strides made.³⁶

Moreover, Rivers conveys the importance of regarding waves as waves of influence rather than singular moments.³⁷ By examining fourth wave artistic case studies in conjunction with the artistic and visual practices of previous feminist waves, I can reveal more about this current resurgence than if it was viewed in isolation.

Fourth wave feminism is an accumulation of elements of previous waves alongside distinctive characteristics, which is all given momentum by the contemporary context. Bailey advocates that “waves that arise in social and political milieus, like waves that arise in water, become defined only in context, relative to the waves that have come and gone before”, thus to understand one wave means to understand what constitutes prior waves.³⁸ This focus on context is furthered by Chamberlain who, in conceptualising feminist waves as

³⁵ Chamberlain 2017, p. 187.

³⁶ Dean and Aune 2015, p. 380.

³⁷ Rivers 2017, p. 109.

³⁸ Bailey 1997, p. 18.

“affective temporalities”, exemplifies intense widespread feeling or emotion, mobilised by external contextual factors, causing a temporal surging or forcefulness which can be seen as a period of heightened feminist action.³⁹ In other words, “the wave as a whole is simply an intense affective response to specific social contexts” with affect being the “cumulative effect of those feelings experienced within a specific context”.⁴⁰ Considering waves in relation to their contextual specificity supports my methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism as well as the importance of situating online activity within its specific local and historical context, both of which I explore further on. Moreover, Chamberlain’s considered use of the term “affect” draws convincing links between feeling and mobility and impact which, in relation to feminist waves, creates a “temporal intensity” or forceful surge of action.⁴¹ This exemplifies the reactive and responsive nature of feminist waves, which I explore in relation to the fourth wave together with its visual and artistic practices and use of social media.

In this thesis I challenge the definition of the fourth wave as being solely online, as suggested by Kitsy Dixon, by demonstrating the inextricable intertwining of the online and offline in a contemporary landscape, as well as highlighting the diversities and multiplicities in online activist discourse, praxis and content.⁴² The reduction of the fourth wave to solely online praxis homogenises this pluralistic and often contradictory temporality. Whilst I agree to some extent that social media is not sufficiently transformative in and of itself to demarcate

³⁹ Chamberlain 2017.

⁴⁰ Chamberlain 2017, pp. 38 and 187.

⁴¹ Chamberlain 2017, pp. 75 and 187.

⁴² Dixon 2014, p. 34.

or catalyse a new wave, the changing technological landscape is a fundamental aspect of the context in which the fourth wave emerged and operates.⁴³ This is supported by Chamberlain who maintains that the fourth wave is not solely defined by online activism, but rather the technological context has facilitated a forceful surge through its rapidity and immediacy.⁴⁴ Furthering this, I consider the proliferation of Web 2.0, with its possibilities and problems, a fundamental part of the landscape which resulted in the emergence of the fourth wave and as a result came to comprise a significant element within their praxis as well as a focus of their discourse and critique.⁴⁵

With waves referring to surges of activity, I use the term fourth wave feminism to refer to more politically engaged and activist strands of contemporary feminisms (which encompasses multiple ideological standpoints). Consequently, I resist the conflation of multiple, coexisting and intersecting contemporary feminisms under umbrella terms like “contemporary feminism”.⁴⁶ Furthermore, for the purposes of this thesis I consider other contemporary feminisms as connected to but separate from the fourth wave, as they emerged at different points and in different contexts, some in response to the fourth wave, such as commodity feminism.⁴⁷ In this sense, it can be argued that the notion of plural

⁴³ This debate is highlighted in Munro 2013, pp. 23-24.

⁴⁴ Chamberlain 2017, p. 192.

⁴⁵ Web 2.0 can be defined as a stage of the internet characterised by social networking and user-generated content, marking a shift from static web pages. It is important to note that the utilisation of digital technologies for purposes of feminist activism originated in the third wave and thus it is not confined to the fourth wave, further demonstrating the overlap between these two temporalities.

⁴⁶ For example, Alison Phipps uses the term “mainstream feminism” to refer to Anglo-American public feminism (2020, p. 5), thus conflating multiple strands of coexisting and intersecting contemporary feminisms.

⁴⁷ Commodity feminism refers to the commodification of feminism in which companies use feminist discourse to advertise and market their products or brand, as well as the transformation of feminism into commodities, which can be owned and/or worn to express one’s feminist identity.

feminisms makes the temporal overlap of waves inevitable, as proposed by Evans.⁴⁸

Although I consider other contemporary feminisms to be somewhat distinct to the fourth wave, they overlap, compete and intertwine, including with postfeminism and anti-feminisms, especially online, forming a central part of the contemporary landscape that the fourth wave responds to and is shaped by, as I demonstrate in chapter two.⁴⁹ This is furthered by Helana Darwin and Amara Miller who maintain that social media creates spaces in which multiple feminist waves and strands exist simultaneously with varying degrees of visibility and interaction.⁵⁰ Overall, through my reframing of the wave metaphor, I challenge its limitations and demonstrate its value in conceptualising and further understanding feminist temporalities and the convergences and divergences between and within them.

1.2 Methodology

I understand my methodology as fourth wave feminist art criticism. This means that I use the framework of feminist art criticism, whilst incorporating and intersecting visual culture and cultural studies and contemporary feminist and social media theory, to innovatively adapt this framework to make it more appropriate for fourth wave visual culture and artistic practices, particularly within the digital sphere. Through this original methodology, I seek to offer an interdisciplinary exploration of fourth wave feminism. Furthermore, it allows me to address some of the gaps within feminist art criticism in dealing with contemporary feminist art practices, especially on social media, which I explore in more detail further on.

⁴⁸ Evans 2015, p. 37.

⁴⁹ #MeToo is a prominent example in which multiple feminisms and anti-feminisms collide and intersect.

⁵⁰ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 14.

Nevertheless, using feminist art criticism as the foundation for my methodology is necessary, as fourth wave visual culture draws on, reworks and is shaped by feminist art traditions and tactics and is not completely separate from these art historical legacies and histories.

Therefore, an art historical grounding is needed to account for and analyse these connections. Moreover, feminist art is inextricably intertwined with the external world, rooted in an awareness of contemporary and historical oppression and subjugation, thus it does not exist in an ahistorical vacuum. Consequently, a methodology which prioritises the analysis of contextual factors, such as feminist art criticism, is essential. As such, my methodology enables me to examine this living and reactive movement through its visual culture and artistic practices and in relation to its context, which is in a state of constant flux.

Scholars of online feminism suggest that the online has shifted women from passive consumers to active producers.⁵¹ However, the visual culture which is being produced and shared online needs further academic attention and documentation, especially with an art historical grounding as it can account for the visual and artistic connections between feminist waves. Consequently, I use a close interpretative analysis of online visual material, which I incorporate into my methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism, to bridge the gap between art historical analysis and the analysis of social media content. This is in accordance with Simon Faulkner, Farida Vis and Francesco D'Orazio's 'Analysing Social Media Images' (2018). Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio identify a dramatic increase in image circulation

⁵¹ Examples include Keller 2012, pp. 432 and 440; Keller and Ryan 2013, p. 12; Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 13; and Shields Dobson 2015, p. 1.

from 2013 onwards, which continues to grow rapidly, with social media's turn towards the visual due to the "popularisation of image-centric platforms" and circulation of images on other platforms and messaging apps.⁵² They propose three ways of approaching social media images: large-scale dataset analysis which can give empirical data but overlooks the content, meaning and intent of individual images; content analysis which works with categories of images providing nuanced patterns on a smaller scale, and close interpretative analysis which works with individual images.⁵³ Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio offer these three different approaches, not as prescriptive or definitive ways to analyse social media images, but to seek to highlight how these approaches are mutually beneficial and can draw different or further insights from the same images.⁵⁴

Close interpretative analysis allows me to work with individual images to explore intertextual meanings, contextual factors and formal and symbolic elements and select images which are most representative of the key issues I am concerned with, thus enabling the centring of feminist art criticism within my methodology.⁵⁵ As such, this approach will also allow me to address gaps in how online visual content is dealt with, particularly in the field of digital feminist scholarship and apply the same treatment to social media images as examples of "high art", which is significant as social media content often makes references, knowingly and/or unknowingly, to "high art". Furthermore, close interpretative analysis enables the incorporation of intergenerational comparisons. Therefore, I can situate fourth wave visual

⁵² Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio 2018, p. 2.

⁵³ Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio 2018, p. 2.

⁵⁴ Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio 2018, pp. 16-17.

⁵⁵ Faulkner, Vis and D'Orazio 2018, pp. 2 and 5.

culture within a broader history of feminist art, rejecting the positioning of online content as separate and distinct from these legacies which results in the neglect of intergenerational connections. Indeed, “social media images are made meaningful through relationships to other cultural discourses that exist within and beyond social media”, as argued by Faulkner, Vis and D’Orazio.⁵⁶ Whilst a close interpretative analysis can overlook channels of communication and the scale of circulation as opposed to more quantitative methodologies, it also allows for an exploration of intertextuality and visibility which is central to how images are encountered and interpreted on social media.⁵⁷ Evidently, close interpretative analysis of social media images valuably contributes to my overarching methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism and helps to bridge the gap between what is considered “high art” and online visual culture.

The production of feminist visual culture on and its distribution and consumption through social media is largely neglected within feminist art history, despite the shift in recent years towards an interdisciplinary exploration of the intersection between feminism and visual culture, with scholars such as Amelia Jones.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, by using the term visual culture, I am consciously accounting for all forms of visual expression in a cultural context.⁵⁹ Jones argues that “feminism shares and adds a more precise political edge to this desire [of visual

⁵⁶ Faulkner, Vis and D’Orazio 2018, p. 5.

⁵⁷ Faulkner, Vis and D’Orazio 2018, p. 6.

⁵⁸ For example, Jones 2010.

⁵⁹ My understanding and framing of visual culture are significantly informed by Jones’ 2010 edited collection of essays *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* and Betterton 2003. Throughout my thesis I use terms like artworks, images and content interchangeably, but all refer to forms of visual material which fall under the umbrella of visual culture.

culture] to break down the boundaries between so-called high art and mass culture”.⁶⁰

Notably, fourth wave visual culture draws on aspects of feminist discourse and critique, popular and mass culture, modes of social media content, “low art”, including craft and “high art”, which is evident in the case studies on which I focus in this thesis, thereby further collapsing such boundaries. For example, Whitney Bell’s *I Didn’t Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics* (2017), which I analyse in chapter five, combines and blurs all of these categories by exhibiting unsolicited images of penises sent via social media alongside artworks, pieces of craft and domestic objects in a gallery space replicating Bell’s apartment. Moreover, the troubling of such relationships and boundaries is in part aided by and enacted on social media. This is supported by Jones who demonstrates that “visual images and embodied experiences” produced through new technologies are dissolving the boundaries between “high” and “low” culture, with the main difference being how they are circulated and contextualised.⁶¹

There is often a disconnect between feminist art criticism and a contemporary feminist context, which I address through my methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism.⁶² Social media, as a fundamental part of the contemporary landscape, is a significant aspect of this gap. Social media has the potential to complicate and challenge aspects of traditional feminist art criticism and (second wave) feminist discourse more broadly. Therefore, the analysis of online material can enable intervention into feminist art criticism to forge an

⁶⁰ Jones 2010, p. 381.

⁶¹ Jones 2010, p. 583.

⁶² The gap between a contemporary feminist context and feminist art criticism is identified in Betterton 2003, p. 11.

active, fluid and constantly evolving methodological framework. For example, the active, agentic and complex female gaze on social media is deserving and needing of additional exploration to further complicate the relationship between empowerment, female desire and feminist critique. Moreover, the divide between the feminist art critic or female artists and the heterosexual male artist or spectator is becoming increasingly complex and nuanced in a contemporary post-#MeToo context, especially when viewed in relation to anti-feminism.

Whilst the majority of works I focus on are consciously produced for a predominantly female audience by female artists, they are still produced, consumed and distributed within a patriarchal society and patriarchal structures. Significantly, the audience and circulation of content on social media cannot be controlled. As such, discourses surrounding the female nude, the male gaze and the exclusion of women in the artworld and art historical discipline, all of which are central in feminist art criticism, significantly inform my analysis. I do not seek to erase or reject the work of earlier feminist art historians, but rather adapt the framework they created to make it appropriate for this rapidly unravelling temporality. Indeed, Rosemary Betterton argues that “dominant regimes of the visual in twenty-first century global culture are mobile and constantly seeking new sites to colonise; a feminist analysis that seeks to engage critically with them must in turn be equally flexible and quick on its feet”.⁶³ Consequently, I become the figure of the “fan of feminism” that Catherine Grant conceptualises, which also accounts for the approaches and practices of several artists I

⁶³ Betterton 2003, p. 14.

discuss in this thesis, such as Cassils and Ridykeulous.⁶⁴ Grant's notion of "fans of feminism" provides a frame for examining contemporary feminist artworks by considering the re-working of and active engagement with the fan object by the figure of the fan, complicating the mother-daughter metaphor often used for addressing feminist generations.⁶⁵ Grant's emphasis on the process of transformation and negotiation and notions of attachment and desire in relation to the figure of the fan highlights the creation of new meanings or alternative narratives.⁶⁶ Therefore, this idea brings into focus the contemporary context whilst also maintaining the importance of and demonstrating attachment to feminist histories.⁶⁷ In forging conversations and active dialogue across historical moments, this idea re-works the relationship to feminist histories, resisting collapse into a reductive celebration or rejection of the past or the "golden political past and an apathetic present".⁶⁸

The prevalence of social media as a platform for the creation, consumption and distribution of visual material is now impossible to ignore. Social media has become entrenched in swathes of the population's daily lives and is a central way in which individuals consume and interact with visual material. Looking only within gallery and museum walls for the legacy of feminist art practices and visual culture neglects an entire arena of contemporary feminist visual culture, especially that which is produced by marginalised people and is excluded from mainstream institutions. This results in misconceptions about the legacies of feminist art as

⁶⁴ Grant 2011.

⁶⁵ Grant 2011, pp. 273-74 and 283-84.

⁶⁶ Grant 2011, pp. 269 and 271-72.

⁶⁷ Grant 2011, p. 274.

⁶⁸ Grant 2011, pp. 269, 271 and 286.

something marginal or non-existent, contributing to a postfeminist rhetoric. The feminist art movement often occupied women-created alternative spaces and the public sphere, operating beyond the confines of traditional art institutions from which they were largely excluded, which often contributed to its lack of documentation. Angela Dimitrakaki claims that such alternative spaces have not survived and that the sites in which we now encounter feminist art are institutional.⁶⁹ However, Courtney E. Martin and Vanessa Valenti maintain that online feminism creates an “alternative space” away from the misogyny often found in mainstream and popular culture.⁷⁰ This is especially true for younger girls, as highlighted by Jessalynn Keller, who are marginalised from traditional spaces of activism, creating the perception that they are not engaging in activism and rendering their work somewhat invisible.⁷¹ Therefore, there is a need to view the alternative spaces in which women are active, as suggested by Keller.⁷² By ignoring thriving alternative spaces and communities which exist online, one risks erasing the work of a generation of feminist artists. Consequently, it is necessary to look to such alternative spaces, especially those which exist online, to avoid the erasure of contemporary feminist art and ensure that it is documented. Indeed, I am giving a permanency to these works to counteract the fleeting nature of social media and the erasure and marginalisation of work by women and feminists. This is supported by Kaitlynn Mendes who demonstrates that despite the fact that feminism is perhaps now more visible than ever “the digital, and thus inherently unstable nature of these campaigns heightens the need to archive their content, but equally, to study and

⁶⁹ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 232.

⁷⁰ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 13.

⁷¹ Keller 2016, p. 261.

⁷² Keller 2012, p. 430.

historicise them for future generations”.⁷³ Feminist visual culture is immediate and born out of necessity at times of political unrest and dissent, capturing the affect of a particular moment when the context is unstable. Therefore, it is critical to understanding moments of feminist resurgence.

1.3 Parameters of the Thesis

A large focus of this study is online material and thus it is, by definition, global and transnational. However, I focus on Anglophone regions due to their dominance within online culture and fourth wave discourse and praxis. This also leads to a focus on neoliberal societies, due to neoliberalism’s inextricable intertwining with postfeminism and neoliberal, popular and commodity feminisms and in turn the fourth wave. Significantly, feminist waves are not global or universal, with the theorisation of feminist waves being dominated by the United States and the United Kingdom, which typically have largely simultaneous yet distinct feminist waves, filled with national, cultural, political and societal specificities. Indeed, Dean and Aune argue that the wave metaphor fails to account for differing national and cultural contexts as feminisms are “inflected by their specific national contexts” and subjected to significant contextual and cultural variabilities with different geographic locations embracing feminism at different times and in different ways.⁷⁴ Consequently, I do not seek to provide an exhaustive global account of this feminist resurgence. Nevertheless, it is necessary to consider the global and transnational context in which fourth wave visual culture is created,

⁷³ Mendes 2021, p. 1.

⁷⁴ Dean and Aune 2015, pp. 376 and 381.

distributed and consumed. As such, I move across national boundaries and social media platforms throughout this thesis.

The online means that those with access are increasingly aware of, envision and experience their global and transnational interconnectedness, which is now immediate and instantaneous, enabling individuals to consider themselves part of this increasingly globalised world. Fabienne Darling-Wolf maintains that “what is most distinctive about our contemporary condition is not just the extent to which different world economies and cultures are interconnected but the extent to which we are aware of this interconnection”, as markers of globalisation that surround individuals are increasingly difficult to ignore.⁷⁵ Social media and the internet further enable the permeation of elements and reminders of “the global” into individuals’ daily lives and further facilitate engagement with cultural products, media and individuals from around the world. But Darling-Wolf is reluctant to overstate the impact of technological advancements on individuals’ engagement with “the global”. She highlights that, whilst digital communication has further facilitated, accelerated and expanded global spread and sharing, the consumption of large amounts of globalised cultural forms, especially in non-US contexts, significantly pre-dates digital technological advancements.⁷⁶ She emphasises how media is a crucial site on which impressions of “the global” are formed and negotiated with media consumption being an immediate, consistent and pervasive way in which globality is experienced.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed

⁷⁵ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 124.

⁷⁶ Darling-Wolf 2015, pp. 14 and 140.

⁷⁷ Darling-Wolf 2015, pp. 12 and 14.

that the space in which global media is now predominantly encountered, by those with access, is online. Moreover, the global user-generated content of social media forges a form of new or alternative media which not only intersects with but also operates outside of mainstream media. In this sense, the supposed democratic nature of social media enables audiences to access transnational content that falls outside of what is promoted and funded by international media corporations. Social media and the internet have furthered the transnationality of media consumption, allowing for an individual in one national context to consume content produced by an “amateur” in a domestic space across the world instantaneously and then directly respond.

Furthermore, Darling-Wolf argues that, whilst the internet, which creates a sense of global closeness, has made access to cultural texts from a broader range of cultural perspectives much easier, *sustained* and routine direct interaction between individuals across national and cultural boundaries remains relatively rare.⁷⁸ Consequently, individuals’ experience of “the global” remains largely imagined and envisioned through their engagement with transnationally distributed commodities or cultural texts, as opposed to direct experience and sustained interaction with individuals living in different places and conditions.⁷⁹ But, online feminist communities are translocal and transnational, forging direct and sustained interaction, with digital affordances allowing for connectivity and dialogue regardless of geographical and temporal distances. In this sense, the affordances of digital technologies are helping to forge and shape translocal and transnational online feminist communities.

⁷⁸ Darling-Wolf 2015, pp. 124-26.

⁷⁹ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 124.

Indeed, the internet and other digital technologies are shaping the way in which people engage with and negotiate the global, national, local and how they interact with one another.⁸⁰ Overall, one's situation within an increasingly global world results in the constant negotiation between the local, national and transnational and global, which are mutually constituted, especially online and in the context of fourth wave feminism.⁸¹

However, the globalised context of the online can be universalising, reductive and homogenising, in which there is a neglect of local, national and cultural specificities, similar to conceptualisations of feminist waves and conflated understandings of feminisms more broadly. Nevertheless, social media does not exist within a universal, ahistorical vacuum. Consequently, it is important to consider the specific political, economic, social and cultural contextual factors of the local and national context in which social media content is produced alongside the internal conditions, structures and conventions of particular social media platforms, as well as understanding the transnational and global context in which these works are shared and distributed and thus their potential geographical reach and impact.⁸²

All of this is further developed by Vanda Černožorská who advocates for an approach which focusses on the relation between digital technologies and feminism that are conceived of and treated as transnational, global forces, through a local and historically specific

⁸⁰ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 156.

⁸¹ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 3.

⁸² Notably, it can be difficult to determine the origins of a particular campaign, image or reference due to the volatile, oversaturated and accelerated nature of social media.

perspective, in order to understand their complexities, the role of new media in the future of feminism and the current position of the movement itself.⁸³ Digital technologies and new media are distinctly global, transcending time and space and enabling users to overcome geographical distances and differing cultural contexts and forge connections and communities. But the ways in which they are utilised and approached and the meaning and potential one ascribes to them are locally, historically and contextually specific and influenced by socio-political backgrounds.⁸⁴ Moreover, feminism is a global and unifying force transcending historical periods, national borders and cultural contexts.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Černohorská argues:

To ignore distinct specificities such as varying goals or strategies deriving from difference experience and contexts as something insignificant in relation to the general concept of feminism would mean to overlook the most crucial aspect of feminism: its diversity and heterogeneity. If we don't account for these differences, we might find ourselves overlooking or even misinterpreting the original, creative and subversive ways feminists use digital technologies to promote gender equality.⁸⁶

Both feminism and digital technologies (and online feminist activism) are not aimed towards homogeneity and reductivity but rather seek to enhance plurality, diversity and progress based on historical and cultural contexts.⁸⁷ Indeed, Černohorská maintains that “the diversity of approaches to online feminism is as multifarious as the variety of feminism itself and that is what makes it ultimately such a strong force”.⁸⁸ Whilst this can present issues in terms of unity and solidarity, it highlights the importance of considering local, national and

⁸³ Černohorská 2019, pp. 269-70 and 272.

⁸⁴ Černohorská 2019, pp. 270, 272 and 280.

⁸⁵ Černohorská 2019, p. 272.

⁸⁶ Černohorská 2019, p. 272.

⁸⁷ Černohorská 2019, p. 270.

⁸⁸ Černohorská 2019, p. 280.

cultural specificities in order to more fully understand online feminist activism in different contexts and its negotiation between the local and the global.

Social media platforms are comprised of their own internal conditions, structures, vernacular, norms, rules and idiosyncrasies, which can vary from platform to platform. As such, social media can be regarded as a “cultural artefact or product of culture in itself”, as conveyed by Černohorská.⁸⁹ Furthermore, social media operates on user-generated content and thus is intrinsically intertwined with the personal lives and contextual specificities of its users. The content which is posted to social media is what constitutes such platforms and such content is a product of the society and culture from which it comes. Therefore, social media content is produced in a locally specific context, alongside the creator’s awareness and envisioning of their global interconnectedness and knowledge of the conditions and conventions of the platform and then distributed in a distinctly global sphere. These intersections of the local, national, transnational and global further evidence how they are mutually constituted and how online visual culture needs to be understood as operating on and negotiating all levels. Whilst a detailed analysis of each case study’s specific local context is unachievable within the confines of this thesis and sometimes cannot be determined in the context of digital networked technologies, one needs to be aware of and consider this negotiation between the local, national, transnational and global in the context of “online” feminism.

⁸⁹ Černohorská 2019, p. 272.

Whilst the myth of the universal often dominates the ways in which social media is conceived, it is important to note that global does not equal universal. Despite surges of feminist activity in “non-Western” contexts over recent years, fourth wave feminism is predominantly Western-centric, in which the UK and US are centralised. This evidently presents issues in relation to Anglo-American-centrism and assumptions of universalism, particularly in the context of social media. Furthermore, it can result in the homogenisation of British and American feminisms under the umbrella of “Anglo-American feminism” which overlooks the significant social, political and cultural differences between the UK and US that impact on their feminist discourse and praxis. However, in recent years the fourth wave has become even more dominated by US narratives, campaigns and initiatives, especially within online discourses, such as #MeToo, Time’s Up and the Women’s Marches. Similarly, the supposed shift towards a greater focus on intersectionality still operates within a “Western” and especially American context (Black American women are the focus of Crenshaw’s seminal 1989 study).⁹⁰ Consequently, this can result in reductive representations of experience and perceived universalities, particularly online, which is often regarded as a homogenous global non-space, overlooking the various ways in which intersecting identities can result in different experiences and oppressions depending on local, cultural or national specificities.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Evans argues that intersectionality has greater currency and is more advanced and less controversial in the US compared to the UK due to the influence of Black feminism, greater provision and inclusion of women’s studies programmes in US colleges and universities and greater acceptance of individualism and prioritisation of individual circumstances (2015, pp. 24 and 201).

⁹¹ There is also evidence to suggest that this extends into offline protests such as SlutWalk and the Women’s Marches, both of which were organised and mobilised online, which were criticised for being exclusionary and centring white feminism.

Darling-Wolf highlights that the division between “the West” and “the rest” results in the tendency to associate “the global” with “the West”, which is often merged with the US as the default representative of the homogenous and monolithic “West”.⁹² In light of this, it can then be argued that the US, in dominating the conceptualisation of “the West” which is associated with “the global”, dominates the envisioning of “the global”. Indeed, Darling-Wolf maintains that the US is often centralised in examination of global processes and as a global cultural producer and consumer of globalised cultural forms.⁹³ Consequently, the US continues to hold a central position in the global imagination.⁹⁴

Even though the internet and social media are global, which entails global power dynamics, in the sense that anyone from around the world, in theory, can access it, there are restrictions. Consequently, when considering “the global” it is imperative to question the extent to which the online is truly global when a significant proportion of the global population does not have access to it. Therefore, utopias based on virtual global connectedness remain incomplete.⁹⁵ As such, it is necessary to be aware that when placing emphasis on technological developments, the focus is inevitably placed on the experience of those relatively privileged groups who have easy access to them.⁹⁶ This focus can result in the assumption that the experience of such privileged individuals is the norm when considering individuals’ engagement with “the global”.⁹⁷ “Individuals’ ability to enter a global

⁹² Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 7.

⁹³ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 19.

⁹⁴ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 126.

⁹⁵ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 124.

⁹⁶ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 140.

⁹⁷ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 155.

online conversation is also still often significantly restricted by technological, language and/or cultural barriers”, especially for those unable to access the very technology which makes such communications possible, which evidently impacts on their engagement with “the global”, as asserted by Darling-Wolf.⁹⁸ Therefore, equality of voice, platform and influence does not exist online, despite the supposedly democratic and global nature of social media.

Furthermore, it is also important to note that even in highly economically rich and powerful nations where access to technology and the internet is widely available, individuals may have very different relationship and approach to such technologies depending on their local context.⁹⁹ Černohorská suggests that whilst digital technologies and new media help individuals connect with others across geographical and cultural contexts, the ways in which people approach, make sense of and use them remains distinct and unique based on their position in and experience with the social world.¹⁰⁰ In a similar manner, approaches to being a feminist and digital technologies “both depend to a large extent on the current socio-political conditions and cultural and historical background”.¹⁰¹

The canonisation of feminist art has a profound impact on the legacy of feminist art and thus which works are reappropriated, referenced or reworked in a contemporary context and the

⁹⁸ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 126.

⁹⁹ Darling-Wolf 2015, p. 155.

¹⁰⁰ Černohorská 2019, p. 272.

¹⁰¹ Černohorská 2019, p. 270.

prevalent themes which continue to dominate.¹⁰² This in turn impacts on the case studies I have selected for my analysis, so that I can account for the dominant themes and tactics within contemporary feminist art, as well as the (dis)continuities across feminist waves.¹⁰³ Indeed, Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe argues that a canon of feminist art, or rather “the canonisation of certain feminisms in art” privileges particular artists, artworks, geographies (US and UK) and themes.¹⁰⁴ Evidently, canons operate on exclusions, especially of those from marginalised groups and those operating outside of artistic centres (New York and Los Angeles in the case of the feminist art movement, which were also feminist centres) and grants visibilities to those privileged within this power structure. Dimitrakaki maintains that the formation of canon, regardless of how alternative it is, implies the working of power upon others, which in the case of the feminist canon is women exercising their power over other women.¹⁰⁵ The art system relies on “exclusion to create the desire to be included” and exclusion can be used as a mechanism to affirm existing structures and institutions.¹⁰⁶ Notably, much work from the feminist art movement and second wave more broadly, was temporal and resisted institutionalisation, which often resulted in a lack of documentation. Therefore, the works and themes that have been canonised are those that have become institutionalised and thus granted visibility and notoriety. For example, the work of the

¹⁰² In her seminal 1999 book *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*, Griselda Pollock offers an interrogation of the canon from a feminist perspective, exploring the problems it presents for feminist interventions in art histories and the issues involved in “differencing” the canon, rather than displacing it.

¹⁰³ It can also be argued that the persistence of particular themes is due to the continuation of certain oppressions, for example sexual violence, beauty standards, objectification and the shame surrounding menstruation.

¹⁰⁴ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 226.

¹⁰⁵ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 226.

¹⁰⁶ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 226.

Guerrilla Girls has become institutionalised by the very institutions that they campaign against. Whilst it is unrealistic for me to attempt to rewrite or dismantle the feminist art canon in this thesis, it is important to acknowledge when examining the divergences and continuities in artistic practices across feminist generations. Furthermore, Sjöholm Skrubbe maintains that “the basic logic of canons seems to strive towards homogeneity rather than heterogeneity and that kind of structure is not compatible with the pluralism of feminisms”.¹⁰⁷ This tension is heightened by the criticism that the wave metaphor can homogenise feminist activity. Yet, this also raises the question of whether there can be solidarity without elements of homogeneity.¹⁰⁸

As a movement that can somewhat be defined by its resistance to simple definition due to its messiness, it is impossible to exhaustively account for the entirety of this transnational, diverse and divergent feminist visual culture. There are many aspects which I am unable to cover due to the scope of this thesis which offer potential for future research and exploration, especially analyses which de-centre the US and UK. The case studies on which I focus are those I perceive to be the most representative of the central tenets and issues of fourth wave feminism, especially in relation to social media. I pair these case studies with works predominantly from the second wave to offer intergenerational comparative analyses that further explore the (dis)continuities that exist between the second and fourth waves. To frame these comparisons, I have identified three core modes that will each be the focus of a substantive chapter: speaking out against sexual violence, “reclaiming” the body and

¹⁰⁷ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 227.

¹⁰⁸ Dimitrakaki and Perry 2013, p. 227.

(in)visibilities and the use of humour and subversion. Analysing and comparing my intergenerational case studies through these framings will allow me to complicate reductive definitions of the fourth wave and binaries that are attributed to the two supposedly opposing waves, such as online versus offline, individual versus collective and public versus private. Helen Molesworth criticises and warns against the attribution of binaries to feminist art practices from different temporalities, namely essentialism to the 1970s and poststructuralist or social constructionist theory to the 1980s and explores ways of opening such comparisons.¹⁰⁹ She suggests that perhaps opposition of essentialism versus poststructuralist theory can be loosened up by acknowledging that the model of compare and contrast:

need not *only* produce dismissive hierarchies, or generational or oppositional binarisms. It is a model equally well designed to elaborate on moments of affinity and shared concerns (not yet acknowledged), *as well as* moments of contestation and difference (which have been insisted on more forcefully).¹¹⁰

This framing justifies my use of comparative analysis to understand points of convergence and divergence across feminist waves, as well as further develop and complicate the definition of fourth wave feminism.

In chapter one 'Online Activism, Offline Implications: The Relationship Between Online Activism and Fourth Wave Feminism', I argue that the blurring of the online and offline, especially the offline implications of online activism, challenge notions of slacktivism and the undermining of online activism and complicate the framing of the fourth wave as a solely

¹⁰⁹ Molesworth 2000.

¹¹⁰ Molesworth 2000, p. 74.

online temporality or that its use of the internet is what defines or demarcates it. In chapter two 'The Intersections of Feminisms, Postfeminisms, Misogynies and Anti-Feminisms in the Digital Age' I set out the complex, contradictory and precarious context in which the fourth wave emerged and operates, as well as the competing forces it responds and is vulnerable to and is shaped by, which can be defined by the coexistence of multiple intersecting and overlapping feminisms, postfeminisms, anti-feminisms and misogynies. Chapter three, 'Speaking Out Against the Unspeakable: Comparing Feminist Artistic Responses to Sexual Violence from the 1970s to the Present Day', centres on the notion of "speaking out" and forms of feminist speech and how this manifests in feminist art across the second and fourth waves and the ways in which feminist artists depict and campaign against sexual violence. Moreover, my intergenerational comparative analyses show the complexities of the fourth wave, particularly in relation to its responses to sexual violence, challenging the oppositional binaries that are often attributed to the second and fourth waves, such as collective versus individualist, offline versus online and public versus private. Through my comparative analyses, chapter four, '(Re)claiming Bodies and Visibilities? Rethinking the Notion of "Reclaiming" in the Context of Fourth Wave Feminism', problematises the attribution of the term "reclaiming" to feminist artistic practices and instead shifts the focus onto notions of redefining, reimagining and reworking. I maintain that this reframing allows for an exploration of the ways in which feminists are politically constructing and making visible counter-hegemonic and alternative narratives and representations through such reactive and transformative processes and thereby destabilising patriarchal boundaries, expectations and conventions. However, whilst such an examination reveals the productive potentials of visibilities, their problems and limitations are equally as exposed and warranting of

attention, particularly in relation to the context of fourth wave feminism. Chapter five '(Un)Funny Feminists: The Subversion of Misogyny and Anti-Feminism in the Context of Digital Networked Technologies' considers the subversion of misogyny and patriarchal conventions, through practices of reappropriation and inversion, in fourth wave artistic practices as a vehicle for humour. This addresses the transformation of something anti-feminist or unfeminist into something explicitly feminist in its purpose which reveals the absurdity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of misogyny and rape culture. My comparative analyses enable me to challenge assertions that humour and such supposedly digitally networked practices highlighted above are a defining mark of and confined to, fourth wave feminism, whilst allowing me to consider the impact Web 2.0 has on practices of reappropriation, subversion, inversion and "culture jamming". Furthermore, I consider the nuances, complexities and multiplicities of feminist humour and laughter. Finally, in my conclusion I revisit my methodology and conceptualisation of the wave metaphor to cement their value and contribution to the scholarly field. I also summarise some of the ways in which fourth wave feminism can be defined and how the relationship between the second and fourth waves can be understood, before offering recommendations for feminist activism that centre on sustainability, dialogue and collaboration. Overall, by analysing the (dis)continuities in visual culture and artistic practices from the second and fourth waves this thesis contributes to the understanding of fourth wave feminism, whilst challenging misconceptions about contemporary feminism and oppositional and linear framings of feminist waves.

CHAPTER ONE: ONLINE ACTIVISM, OFFLINE IMPLICATIONS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE ACTIVISM AND FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

2.1 Introduction

The rise of social media and online activism has formed a fundamental part of the landscape which allowed for the forceful surge of fourth wave feminism and as a result came to constitute a significant part of its praxis and discourse, as argued in my introduction, thus understanding the complex relationship between the fourth wave and online activism is imperative. As I have already noted, what defines the fourth wave remains widely contested. It is sometimes stated that what distinguishes the fourth wave from earlier waves is its utilisation of the internet, especially social media. For example, in 2009 Deborah Solomon wonders “Maybe we’re onto the fourth wave now” and Jessica Valenti (co-founder of the blog *Feministing*) responds “Maybe the fourth wave is online”.¹ Similarly, Dixon maintains that “it is without question that we are facing the new wave of feminism, via hash tagging”.² This is explored by Rivers who maintains that the apparent newness of the fourth wave is associated with developing forms of media and technology, such as social media, leading to the emergence of what is referred to as “hashtag feminism”.³ However, such terms can overlook the blurring of the online and offline, by focussing solely on online activist tactics. Evans suggests that straightforward links between particular modes of activism and feminist moments or campaigns can be misleading and imply a homogenous approach which

¹ Solomon 13 November 2009 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/15/magazine/15fob-q4-t.html?searchResultPosition=1>], accessed 6 June 2022. Notably, in this interview, Valenti expresses not liking the terms of second and third wave, due to their inaccuracy.

² Dixon 2014, p. 34.

³ Rivers 2017, p. 107.

overlooks the range of activity undertaken.⁴ Therefore, it is necessary to resist reductive and simplified definitions and pigeonholing of feminist waves. Just as the fourth wave is not monolithic, feminisms' use of the internet and social media is diverse, fragmented, divergent, complex and often contradictory and is not unique nor limited to the fourth wave. Indeed, online feminist activism did not begin with hashtags and social media platforms. The history of the relationship between feminism and the internet is as long as the internet itself and transgresses multiple feminist waves. Feminist online activity has evolved with the development of the digital sphere, beginning with blogs and now largely operating through social media platforms in the era of Web 2.0. Evans demonstrates that "how, where and in what ways feminists choose to undertake their political activism are questions that help us understand points of continuity and change within the feminist movement".⁵ By comparing works from the second and fourth waves in this thesis I can examine the impact of digital networked technologies on longstanding feminist tactics and traditions, such as consciousness-raising and subversion. Whilst the use of the internet or social media is not enough to demarcate or catalyse a new wave, the digital sphere and online activism is inextricably intertwined with the fourth wave. Nevertheless, the fourth wave operates both online and offline and transgresses and manipulates the boundary between the two supposedly separate realms, as exemplified by the case studies I analyse in this thesis.

In this chapter, I explore the intertwining of the online and offline, particularly the significant and often overlooked offline implications of online activism, by offering a critique of

⁴ Evans 2015, p. 72.

⁵ Evans 2015, p. 72.

Malcolm Gladwell's 2010 article 'Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted'.⁶

This further complicates the perception that the fourth wave exists solely online or that its use of the internet is what defines it. Even though online and offline realms are often seen as dichotomous and separate to one another, they have a symbiotic yet complex and often fractured relationship, particularly in relation to feminist activism and visual culture. Online spaces can offer safety, solidarity and accessibility for oppressed communities when offline spaces do not and they can inform, mobilise and raise consciousness with a greater reach, thus often extending the work of offline activism, instead of replacing it. However, the digital sphere is not intrinsically feminist and can make online feminists and their communities highly vulnerable, in large part due to the risk of online abuse as well as the precarity and unsustainability of online feminist labour. Indeed, Rivers argues that the idea that the internet and online feminism are synonymous with the fourth wave or provide a haven for feminist activism potentially belies the risks and harms women are exposed to when publicly communicating feminist ideas online.⁷ Whilst the online sphere can provide a sense of safety or protection in certain contexts, it is not guaranteed and it is precarious, even within feminist spaces. Nevertheless, online activism shows significant potential in its ability to create political, social, and cultural change and enable collective organisation and mobilisation as well as to provide a space of community and connectivity that is often difficult to forge offline. The case studies that I analyse in this thesis exemplify how the online extends into the offline and vice versa and highlight the ways in which fourth wave

⁶ Significantly, this article was written only four years after Facebook and Twitter were launched to the public and the same year that Instagram was created. Therefore, it was written in the infancy of social media platforms and online activism and prior to the intense surge of the fourth wave.

⁷ Rivers 2017, p. 127.

feminist artists are dealing with and responding to this entanglement of the online and offline.

2.2 “Slacktivism”?

One of the main criticisms of online activism is that it results in what is referred to as “slacktivism” or “clicktivism”, which can be defined as the notion that acts of online activism and digital political participation require minimal time, effort or commitment and achieve very little, such as liking or sharing a post, signing an online petition or using a hashtag.⁸ For example, Helen Lewis claims that the fourth wave has been noisy and grabbed attention but has failed to achieve concrete victories “that will last in a way hashtag campaigns cannot”, using #MeToo as an example, whilst questioning whether we are actually moving forward.⁹ This notion of slacktivism is strongly echoed by Gladwell who maintains that online activism “succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice”.¹⁰ Therefore, Gladwell is suggesting that online activism is able to achieve widespread participation by encouraging people to partake in something that involves no risk and little motivation. However, Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller demonstrate that feminist hashtag “contributions were often not made without a consideration of

⁸ Notably, scholars of online feminism often seek to challenge the notion of slacktivism or the perception that online activism is a lesser form of dissent. For example, Zaslav 2018, p. 104 and Lokot 2018, p. 802.

⁹ Lewis 2020, pp. 5-6 and 322.

¹⁰ Gladwell 27 September 2010 [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>], accessed 22 November 2019. I am drawing on texts from mainstream journalists, from the US and UK, as they indicate widespread ideas and misconceptions about online (feminist) activism that are circulated in the same spaces in which fourth wave feminism operates.

possible consequences and significant emotional investment, including a fear not of public attention, but a lack of attention”, such as not being believed or taken seriously.¹¹ For feminists and survivors, the emotional labour and weightiness of publicly acknowledging or sharing one’s own experience or reading or amplifying others’ stories is full of risks, vulnerabilities and potential sacrifices, as I will demonstrate in relation to Chalk Back in chapter three, of which they are well aware, whilst to those on the outside it may just appear as simple as posting a hashtag. In cases like #BeenRapedNeverReported and other related campaigns, many of the survivors who ultimately decide to publicly share their experiences have remained silent for years in fear of being disbelieved, scrutinised and re-traumatised.

2.3 The Precarity and Unsustainability of Digital Feminist Labour

Evidently, the difficult reality of digital feminist labour and participation is often obscured by charges of slacktivism and the trivialisation of online work. Indeed, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller maintain that counter to assumptions of slacktivism, there is often a lot of hidden unpaid labour involved in maintaining feminist campaigns and organisations which, like other forms of “women’s work”, is “highly affective, precarious and exploitative”.¹² Mendes builds on this by arguing that “digital feminist labour, carried out predominantly by women, is precarious, immaterial, aspirational, and affective”, as well as time-consuming, often invisible, exploitative, mundane, repetitive, taxing, overwhelming, tedious, boring and

¹¹ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 133.

¹² Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018, p. 239.

largely un(der)paid, yet it is vital to sustaining online campaigns and initiatives.¹³ This raises questions about the “sustainability of such unpaid labour in light of online abuse, burnout, and other work-life commitments”.¹⁴ Indeed, burnout, which can be defined as a state of physical or mental collapse or exhaustion as a result of overexertion, largely through overwork or stress, is a significant implication of unsustainable online feminist labour. This can result in activists having to scale back on their activism, or abandon it entirely.¹⁵ In particular, the largely unpaid nature of online feminist labour heightens the risk of burnout. Mendes conveys that whilst some individuals find ways to earn money or make a living from their activism, which includes feminist artists who share their work online, there remains important questions about the sustainability of such work when it is largely unremunerated as, without sufficient compensation and strategies to handle such work, activists often succumb to burnout.¹⁶ This is supported by Martin and Valenti who demonstrate that there is a “psychology of deprivation” enabled by feminism not valuing its own labour, with largely unpaid, voluntary work leading to burnout, which is not new for feminists movements and is holding the movement back.¹⁷ Consequently, “as women’s work continues to be undervalued and underpaid in various sectors, it is pertinent to highlight unpaid activism as a feminist issue”, as argued by Mendes.¹⁸ Un(der)paid labour within feminist activism is not unique to social media or the fourth wave. It is an extension of the ways in which women’s work is often dismissed, unpaid, undervalued, precarious and vulnerable, which was evident

¹³ Mendes 2021, pp. 1, 4-5, 8, 10-11 and 15.

¹⁴ Mendes 2021, p. 4.

¹⁵ Mendes 2021, p. 11.

¹⁶ Mendes 2021, pp. 11 and 15.

¹⁷ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 23.

¹⁸ Mendes 2021, p. 11.

during the 1970s feminist art movement as this thesis makes clear. Therefore, women's work online should not be treated as separate to conversations surrounding women's labour offline, particularly because digital feminist labour can have significant offline implications due to its unsustainability. Also, online feminists often must undertake paid employment alongside their unpaid digital activism, further heightening the risk of burnout.

Furthermore, there is a significant amount of emotional labour involved in (online) feminist activism, which has gendered associations and significant implications. The emotional weight placed onto online feminists comes not only from sharing, listening, reading and responding to stories of gendered violence, as within Chalk Back, but also from receiving pleas for help and support, which activists are unequipped to deal with.¹⁹ This can negatively impact activists' mental health, further affecting the sustainability of such labour. As highlighted by Mendes, "support is hugely important for activists' long-term health, but rarely is it put into place – likely because of the grassroots nature of such groups which lack structure, resources and training".²⁰ Paradoxically, support and guidance for mental health within online activism is often promoted and shared on social media, whilst social media is simultaneously placed as the source of such harm. For example, in February 2022 Chalk Back launched a six-month programme to support the mental health of activists to ensure sustainable activism, including webinars and a social media campaign. However, it is ironic that they employed social media to address the mental health struggles of activists and participants whose mental health is positioned as having been negatively impacted by social media. This reflects

¹⁹ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 86.

²⁰ Mendes 2021, p. 9.

how social media is seen as overwhelmingly harmful to young girls and women, whilst also being a space of empowerment and agency, as evident within the body positive and self-love movements which I explore in chapter four. Also, the emphasis is often placed on self-care, strategies for which are regularly commoditised with the impetus is placed on the individual to change their behaviour and mindset, rather than on reducing the precarity and unsustainability of online labour, thereby reflecting the notion of psychic regulation which I discuss in chapter four. Evidently, emotional labour is longstanding within feminist activism (for example, with consciousness-raising), yet the scale and unavoidability online is somewhat unique to social media and digital activism, as users are constantly confronted with the demand and expectation for such labour.

2.4 The Risk of Online Abuse and its Offline Implications

As a comparison point to online activism, Gladwell draws on the American Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Greensboro sit-ins in 1960, as an example of what true activism looks like, as he claims citizens have forgotten what this is.²¹ Gladwell emphasises the threats and violence faced by Civil Rights protesters to suggest that activism without violent backlash is not true activism and that there is no threat or real risk with online activism.²² However, online abuse is a constant risk for women on social media, which can lead to offline violence and it exists on a continuum with others form of gendered violence, such as sexual assault and harassment. Thus, online abuse is not distinct nor separate. Whilst

²¹ Gladwell 27 September 2010 [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>], accessed 22 November 2019.

²² Gladwell 27 September 2010 [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>], accessed 22 November 2019.

feminists have always faced abuse and backlash, the scale of this on social media is unprecedented and has become unavoidable and unrelenting. The spaces in which a large number of feminists conduct their activism are now those in which they are arguably the most vulnerable and susceptible to violence.

Scholars and activists agree that gendered online abuse acts as a form of censorship, with significant offline psychological, financial and professional implications, preventing women from participating fully in public life online.²³ This can result in women self-censoring and self-disciplining, privatising their accounts, anonymising themselves, withdrawing from public discourse or removing themselves from the online world entirely.²⁴ As I demonstrate in this thesis, fourth wave feminists are interrogating and responding to the entanglement of the online and offline regarding gendered violence. For example, in *I Didn't Ask For This Bell* explores the offline implications of online harassment by exhibiting “dick pics” in a replica of her own apartment.

It is often presumed that retreating from the online public sphere is the solution for online abuse. This is supported by Rivers, who conveys that the prevailing assumption with victims of online abuse is that if they stop engaging publicly with feminism or occupying a public platform altogether then the abuse would cease.²⁵ She further examines the implications of this by maintaining that:

²³ For example, Bates 2020, pp. 163-64; Barker and Jurasz 2019, p. 95; and Jane 2016, pp. 286-87.

²⁴ For example, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 14; Bates 2020, p. 163; and Jane 2016, p. 286.

²⁵ Rivers 2017, p. 144.

Although it could be argued that the solution is simply to log-off the social media sites and thus avoid seeing the abuse altogether; if social media is being hailed as a possible format for new forms of feminist activism, then abusing women until they no longer engage via this medium becomes an effective tool for silencing feminists.²⁶

If women must retreat from the online sphere to ensure their safety (or merely avoid witnessing the abuse), then their ability to equally and fully participate in that space never existed to begin with. Therefore, women's safety online can be seen as contingent on their relative silence and invisibility (yet even women without a public platform are subject to online abuse and harassment), despite social media often being hailed as a democratic, equal and open forum.

Whilst online abuse has significant offline implications for victims, for example "doxing", in which a person's personal details are shared online, jeopardising their safety, it rarely has offline consequences for perpetrators, perhaps because the harm it causes is often dismissed and trivialised. Like other forms of gendered violence, it is often treated as an individual rather than a structural problem and pressure is placed on women to modify and restrict their behaviour to avoid receiving or witnessing such abuse, such as not reading comments.²⁷ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller argue that "rather than understanding this abuse as personal, we need to understand such interactions as symptomatic of a broader social issue involving issues of gender equity and other intersecting axes of oppression".²⁸ Online abuse has a disproportionate impact on those from the most marginalised communities,

²⁶ Rivers 2017, p. 115.

²⁷ Also, the online hate campaign Gamergate (2014-15), shows how online abuse is not always individual acts but can be highly organised and strategic.

²⁸ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 14.

particularly transgender and queer people and people of colour. For example, Black women will receive abuse that is both racist and misogynistic and are less likely to receive attention or support, as evidenced by the onslaught of abuse Leslie Jones received following the release of the all-female *Ghostbusters* remake in 2016. Laura Bates highlights that the implication of this is that “the voices we most desperately need to hear – the people whose participation on such platforms is most needed if we are to tackle the tide of harassment and intolerance – and also those most frequently driven offline by intolerable and unchecked abuse”.²⁹ This rejects the perception that social media provides a space and platform for multiple diverse voices, especially for those who are marginalised within mainstream discourse. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of labour as well as an emotional burden involved in not just receiving this abuse but in deleting comments, blocking and reporting accounts and restricting abusers’ access to profiles, whilst also attempting to educate people, which all occurs alongside their other activist and political work. Indeed, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller demonstrate that there are:

complex strategies of building digital literacies – where women learn to navigate the ‘risks’ of online trolls through trial and error and through their experiences and make complex judgements and employ highly creative strategies to manage the negative impact of trolls.³⁰

2.5 The Role of Slacktivists

Gladwell also claims that the “strong-tie” phenomena makes people more likely to participate in high-risk activism, whereas social media is built on weak-tie connections as a

²⁹ Bates 2020, p. 169.

³⁰ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 119.

source of new ideas and information, rather than resistance and resilience.³¹ Consequently, it “makes it easier for activists to express themselves and harder for that expression to have any impact”.³² However, peripheral participants of political movements, which can be termed “slacktivists”, play a significant role in the distribution of both informative and motivational material.³³ In this sense, weak-ties on social media can form an effective network of dissemination and mobilisation, which can involve the sharing of information, resources, petitions and hashtags, as well as liking and commenting on content, allowing it to spread even further. Social media challenges more traditional top-down forms of communication, shifting them horizontally, where all participants can play a role in the creation and dissemination of material. This demonstrates the “mobilisation potential of repeated exposure”, as even though peripheral members are less active, their overall contribution outweighs that of core participants, as demonstrated by John T. Jost *et al.*³⁴

Furthermore, as conveyed by Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, passive witnesses to online conversations can still benefit and learn from them, without necessarily actively engaging.³⁵ This allows people to consume feminist content, including visual culture, online without publicly declaring their beliefs, which can bear significant risks. But passively consuming content online could make users feel as though they are actively engaging in activism. Whilst, as stated in my introduction, scholars of online feminism argue that the online

³¹ Gladwell 27 September 2010 [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>], accessed 22 November 2019.

³² Gladwell 27 September 2010 [<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>], accessed 22 November 2019.

³³ Jost, Barberá, Bonneau, Langer, Metzger, Nagler, Sterling and Tucker 2018, p. 102.

³⁴ Jost, Barberá, Bonneau, Langer, Metzger, Nagler, Sterling and Tucker 2018, p. 103.

³⁵ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 141.

sphere has shifted women from passive consumers to active producers, it is also necessary to consider how women can be both simultaneously on social media. There is not a clear shift from one to the other but rather the boundary between the two is becoming increasingly blurred. For example, in *I Didn't Ask For This*, Bell is both a passive receiver of unsolicited images and an active producer in transforming such harassment into a feminist exhibition. Therefore, my analysis of fourth wave visual and artistic practices in this thesis explores the ways in which contemporary feminist artists both consume and actively produce in response to, through processes like (re)appropriation and reworking, both feminist and misogynistic or anti-feminist cultural products and discourses. This extends Keller's argument that "reframing [...] the internet as a space of opportunity, public engagement and feminist activism for girls allows us to productively rethink of girls as active agents, cultural producers and citizens rather than passive victims and cultural dupes in the online world".³⁶

Notably, through his conceptualisation of "weak ties", Gladwell undermines how social media provides the opportunity for people to build connections with those they have never met in-person to form networks of commonality and solidarity. As this thesis demonstrates, such connectivity can be facilitated through hashtag activism or the sharing, (re)circulation and reworking of visual culture, as I explore in chapters three and five, respectively. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller explain that "powerful – if sometimes only ephemeral or temporary – connections, solidarities and investments in social change generated" online complicate the

³⁶ Keller 2012, p. 440.

idea that the online encourages fantasies of change rather than material change and activism.³⁷ Therefore, exploring the affective power of connections and networks established via social media challenges the perception that online activism has little material impact.

Martin and Valenti maintain that online activism goes beyond the tangible, serving to heal, reclaim and forge solidarity.³⁸ It provides support that strongly contrasts the blaming and dismissal that women, particularly survivors, experience in their everyday experiences.³⁹ Consequently, social media is both a space imbued with risk for women and feminists and a space of support and solidarity that can redress the harm cause by both online and offline abuse. Nevertheless, there is conflict within online feminist spaces that arguably can be linked to so-called “cancel” or “call out” culture, which is typically framed as a generational issue with figures like Germaine Greer and JK Rowling. However, such conflict is not new to feminism, nor unique to social media, as evidenced by Jo Freeman’s conceptualisation of “trashing” in her 1976 article ‘Trashing: The Dark Side of Sisterhood’.⁴⁰ Moreover, the focus on feminist infighting can be used to reinforce negative stereotypes, such as “catty” and “bitchy” women and further generational divides, distracting from the important work that is being done.

³⁷ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 5.

³⁸ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 12.

³⁹ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018, p. 243.

⁴⁰ Freeman 1976 [<https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/trashing.html>], accessed 12 March 2021. Notably, Rivers refers to online feminist infighting as “online ‘trashing’”, thus reflecting this precedent (2017, p. 119).

2.6 Barriers to Online Activism

There are significant barriers which restrict people's ability to partake in online activism equally and fully. Indeed, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller argue that:

Although it may be technologically easy for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there remain emotional, mental or practical barriers which create different experiences and legitimate some feminist voices, perspectives and experiences over others.⁴¹

Online feminist political engagement and labour privileges those with the time, flexibility and financial security that is required to partake in unpaid activism, usually alongside paid labour, which excludes economically disadvantaged and working-class people, single parents, carers and people with disabilities and also intersects with factors like race and gender identity. Alongside this, there are a number of digital barriers which can prove exclusionary, as outlined by Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, such as a lack of technological skills, limited access to technology, being unable to maintain an online presence and activism, unfamiliarity with online feminist vocabularies and discourses that are constantly changing and not keeping up to date with new tools.⁴² The implication of this is that platforms do not tell the stories of those who lack the technological skills and knowledge to be able to articulate their experiences via digital platforms, thus rendering some survivors invisible and instead centring those with the ability to utilise such technologies.⁴³ All of this, in turn, impacts the visual culture that is shared on and distributed through social media. Furthermore, such exclusions can further intergenerational divides. For example, Julia Schuster maintains that online feminist activism makes young female political participation

⁴¹ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018, p. 237.

⁴² Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 20.

⁴³ Mendes, Keller and Ringrose 2019, p. 1301.

“invisible” to those who do not use or are unfamiliar with this method of activism, creating a generational divide amongst feminists, which causes older feminists to lament that young women are not continuing the strides made by waves before them.⁴⁴ Moreover, the twenty-four hour, rapid and immediate nature of online activism, which allows for feminist activism to be constantly reactive to what is happening, means that there is never a moment of silence or pause, which is reflected in the reactivity of fourth wave feminist visual culture. This perhaps creates an expectation to continuously engage and produce online. Consequently, those who are unable to offer this level of commitment feel excluded, whilst those who do feel pressured to constantly respond to current affairs and news stories risk experiencing burnout because of this largely unpaid, overwhelming and time-consuming labour.

2.7 The Safety and Accessibility of Online Activism

Despite online abuse and barriers to participation, the digital sphere is often still regarded as safer and more accessible, as supported by Mendes, Ringrose and Keller.⁴⁵ Indeed, those who are unable to participate in offline activism can more easily contribute and become involved in online feminist campaigns. Notably, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller argue that “participating in digital feminist campaigns is pedagogical – and can provide a better understanding of feminist politics and acts as a low-barrier entrance for other types of (feminist) activism and political engagement”.⁴⁶ They further this by maintaining that

⁴⁴ Schuster 2013, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018, p. 243.

⁴⁶ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 5

“feelings of relative safety online lends further support to just how important digital platforms are in providing pedagogical spaces to develop feminist consciousness and find and maintain support for feminist views in our contemporary moment”.⁴⁷ Therefore, online spaces provide an easier and perhaps less risky way of getting involved with activism and developing one’s feminist consciousness that is perhaps more accessible and less intimidating than in-person activism, such as meetings or marches, whilst still allowing for the establishing networks of support and solidarity. In addition to this, oftentimes tactics are employed to ensure online content is more accessible for people with accessibility needs, such as the use of closed captioning or image descriptions.

2.8 The Relationship Between Online and Offline Activism

Whilst feminism has evolved with the development of social media, traditional forms of feminist activism remain prominent and in many ways are galvanised by online feminist networks. The case studies in this thesis demonstrate the continuation of offline forms of feminist dissent, as well as how online and offline activism are mutually beneficial and sustaining. For example, the public art movement Chalk Back, which I discuss in chapter three, uses social media to document and spread its feminist street art and digital network-building and hashtag activism to expand their consciousness-raising efforts. This challenges Evans’ argument that “the plethora of marches and visible public protests that now constitute part of the feminist resistance is testament to the symbolic power of such forms of protest but also to the limited opportunities afforded by the internet”.⁴⁸ Whilst certain

⁴⁷ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019, p. 124.

⁴⁸ Evans 2015, p. 73.

forms of offline protest and activism are not possible online, the internet is able to galvanise international offline protests on an unprecedented scale. For example, social media played a major role in the mobilisation and organisation of the 2017 Women's March, which was likely the biggest single-day protest in US history, with an estimated 3.2 million to 5.3 million people involved across at least 653 recorded marches in the US, with approximately an additional 261 marches taking place internationally.⁴⁹ Furthermore, much of the fourth wave's visual culture uses social media to distribute images from physical protests and encourage offline political participation, such as partaking in elections or contacting a local representative, further challenging charges of slacktivism, as seen in fig. 2. As highlighted by Margaret Matich, Rachel Ashman and Elizabeth Parsons the digital sphere allows physical protest to have an impact that extends beyond the temporality of the protest; furthermore, digital campaigns can continuously live on, be visible and occupy space.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, this is not certain nor guaranteed, as content can be removed and platforms become obsolete, furthering the precarity of online feminist activism.

⁴⁹ Chenoweth and Pressman 7 February 2017 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/02/07/this-is-what-we-learned-by-counting-the-womens-marches/>], accessed 24 March 2022.

⁵⁰ Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2018, pp. 341 and 353.



Fig. 2 @womensmarch Instagram posts as part of the Power to the Polls campaign during the 2018 US mid-term elections.

2.9 Conclusion

Whilst the fourth wave is not solely an online temporality, nor does its use of social media wholly define or demarcate it, the interactions and intersections between the two are complex. Indeed, Rivers argues that although social media is important to the fourth wave, the relationship between the two is both fraught and productive.⁵¹ For women and feminists, social media is a space of connectivity, agency and empowerment as well as one of risk and vulnerability. Furthering this, the online and offline realms are not dichotomous, but rather their relationship is symbiotic, complex and oftentimes fractured. By challenging the notion of slacktivism, it is clear how the fourth wave transgresses the digital sphere due to the inextricable intertwining of the online and offline and the ways in which both realms positively and negatively affect each other. Charges of slacktivism overlook the significant

⁵¹ Rivers 2017, p. 115.

offline implications of online activism and political participation which are brought to the fore when one considers the risks, vulnerabilities and precarities of online feminist political engagement and activism, particularly the prevalence of online abuse and the unpaid, invisible and overwhelming nature of digital feminist labour. The case studies I analyse in this thesis highlight how fourth wave feminist artists are responding to and interrogating the entanglement of the online and offline, particularly the offline implications of online experiences and the relationship between online and offline activism. Also, by comparing second wave and fourth wave case studies, I examine the impact of Web 2.0 on feminist tactics and traditions to further demonstrate the (dis)continuities and overlaps between feminist waves.

CHAPTER TWO: THE INTERSECTIONS OF FEMINISMS, POSTFEMINISMS, MISOGYNIES AND ANTI-FEMINISMS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

3.1 Introduction

Fourth wave feminism is situated in a context in which postfeminism persists and anti-feminisms and misogynies are hyper-visible, particularly in the digital sphere, yet the feminist label is desirable and commodified. Consequently, the fourth wave coexists and intersects with multiple overlapping feminisms, postfeminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms, which has a profound impact on its discourse, praxis and visual culture. Therefore, before offering analyses of my visual and artistic case studies in the following chapters, it is necessary to set out this contradictory and precarious context which the fourth wave navigates as well as the competing and conflicting forces it responds and to which it is vulnerable. By focussing on visual culture and artistic practices, this thesis shows how the fourth wave visually and artistically responds to and is unknowingly shaped by various intersecting strands of feminism, postfeminism, anti-feminism and misogyny, whilst also drawing on and reworking feminist art tactics and traditions in its convergence and overlapping with earlier waves.

As I argue, the fourth wave cannot be defined solely by its use of the internet and social media, nor by its ideologies. Instead, perhaps what defines it is the context which galvanised it and in which it continues to operate. Indeed, as outlined in my introduction, Chamberlain, in her conceptualisation of affective temporalities, maintains that waves are intense affective responses to specific contextual factors, as opposed to being reliant on

generational specificity.¹ Therefore, this chapter explores the intersections between feminisms, postfeminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms within the contemporary context, to highlight the complexities and volatility that the fourth wave negotiates.² In doing so, I complicate the linear framing that anti-feminist and postfeminist backlashes are discrete periods which emerge in response to feminist resurgences.

Jessalynn Keller and Maureen E. Ryan suggest that there is not a singular popular feminism, but rather a coexistence of multiplicity and conditions, including postfeminism.³ Also, there is a coexistence and intersection of popular and seemingly reinvigorated and rampant misogyny and emergent and reenergised feminisms, which include activist feminism but is not limited to it, particularly within digital spaces.⁴ Similarly, Rosalind Gill demonstrates that there are multiple (old and new) feminisms that coexist with revitalised anti-feminism and popular misogyny, thus there is a need to make distinctions between different forms of mediated feminism as some forms may have little to do with and be antithetical to activist feminism, such as neoliberal feminism.⁵ As outlined in my introduction, I differentiate the fourth wave from other, less politically-engaged and activist forms of contemporary feminism and resist their conflation, whilst acknowledging their overlaps and intersections.⁶

¹ Chamberlain 2017, pp. 8 and 38.

² Another key aspect of this context is the politicised social climate, which, in the US and UK, has largely been caused by the global economic recession in 2008, the Conservative party regaining power in the UK in 2010 and subsequent austerity measures, Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump, populism and nationalism.

³ Keller and Ryan 2018, p. 2.

⁴ Keller and Ryan 2018, pp. 5 and 14.

⁵ Gill 2016, p. 612.

⁶ In this chapter, I am unable to cover all contemporary coexisting feminisms, such as neoliberal, celebrity and commodity, however the ways in which they shape the fourth wave will emerge throughout the rest of this thesis.

Therefore, in this thesis I often use the plural “feminisms” to demonstrate how feminism is not singular and at any given moment there are layers of multiplicity at play which all feed into and compete with one another, including postfeminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms. Indeed, Jonathan Cohn argues that, rather than waves, there are simultaneous currents of postfeminism, feminism and antifeminism which challenges the linear framing of the backlash.⁷ In this chapter, I focus on the intersections between the fourth wave and postfeminism, popular feminism, misogynies and anti-feminisms, all of which are simultaneously hyper-visible and operate online and offline, in order to show the ways in which feminism is both at once popularised and reviled and explore how the fourth wave responds to and is shaped by these conflicting conditions.

3.2 Postfeminism

Postfeminism is often misperceived as a backlash to feminism, or an age characterised by the achievement of gender equality and the perception that feminism is no longer required. However, the presence of the fourth wave and other popular forms of feminism do not efface the existence of postfeminism, thus an exploration of the complex relationship between postfeminism and the fourth wave is evidently necessary. This is supported by Gill who argues that a postfeminist sensibility can co-exist with resurgences in feminism.⁸ Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis I will adopt Gill’s conceptualisation of postfeminism as a “distinctive sensibility”, as she explains postfeminism is made up of a patterned

⁷ Cohn 2018, p. 179.

⁸ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019, p. 14.

articulation of a number of interrelated themes which constitute the sensibility.⁹ These themes include:

that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; and a resurgence of ideas about natural sexual difference

as well as “a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference”, all of which are intertwined with contemporary neoliberalism.¹⁰ These themes coexist with and are structured by continuing inequalities in relation to class, race, sexuality, disability and gender identity, which becomes particularly significant in relation to the intersection of postfeminism and popularised forms of feminism.¹¹ I will also apply some of the conditions identified by Amy Shields Dobson which characterise a postfeminist cultural context. These include: the continued and prominent objectification of female bodies in the West, now framed as “chosen/agentive”; new femininities and the representations which construct them, for instance, women as strong, capable, confident and fun-loving as opposed to weak and passive, and finally, highly publicised debates of the sexualisation of girls and women and the positioning of women as in need of protection, surveillance and regulation as a result, all of which women must negotiate.¹²

⁹ Gill 2007, p. 147.

¹⁰ Gill 2007, p. 147 and 149, also concurred in Butler 2013, p. 44.

¹¹ Gill 2007, p. 149.

¹² Shields Dobson 2015, p. 29.

Evidently, postfeminist discourses are contradictory and contain an entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist ideas and themes.¹³ This is conceptualised by Angela McRobbie as the “double entanglement”, in which feminism has become common sense whilst also being fiercely repudiated, reviled and almost hated.¹⁴ McRobbie furthers this by conveying that postfeminism draws on, invokes and takes into account elements of feminism to suggest that equality is achieved and a repertoire of new meanings is installed which emphasises that feminism is obsolete, permitting a thorough dismantling of feminist politics and discrediting the need for its revival.¹⁵ In other words, feminism is evoked to undo it.¹⁶ Furthermore, the vocabulary of empowerment and choice is drawn on and transformed into more individualistic discourse and then deployed and disseminated as a kind of substitute for feminism, to prevent feminism from re-emerging.¹⁷ Notably, the fourth wave draws upon such discourses, especially in depictions of the visible body, which I discuss in chapter four. But rather than using them as a substitute for feminism to prevent it from reappearing, the fourth wave uses them as an indicator or representation of feminism and feminist subjectivity.

Notably, McRobbie argues that the “double entanglement” provides a “complexification of backlash”.¹⁸ Indeed, by highlighting the simultaneous invoking and repudiation of feminism, McRobbie challenges the linear framing that the notion of the backlash pursues. This

¹³ Gill 2007, p. 149.

¹⁴ McRobbie 2004, p. 256 and 2009, p. 6.

¹⁵ McRobbie 2004, pp. 255-56.

¹⁶ McRobbie 2004, p. 259.

¹⁷ McRobbie 2009, p. 1.

¹⁸ McRobbie 2009, p. 6.

coexistence of and battleground between feminist and anti-feminist practices and discourses is a central part of the context that the fourth wave navigates, particularly on social media, as I discuss further below. This is particularly evident in my analysis of Bell's *I Didn't Ask For This* and Rape Crisis Scotland's *10 Top Tips to End Rape* in chapter five, both of which respond to these conflicting forces by (re)appropriating and subverting expressions of rape culture and misogyny.

Whilst postfeminism is more closely linked to neoliberal, commodity and popular feminisms than more activist and politically engaged feminisms, there are still overlaps and convergences between the fourth wave and postfeminism. Indeed, Rivers maintains that "popular culture and contemporary discussions of feminism have arguably become so saturated with this postfeminist sensibility that it is hard to tell where postfeminism ends and the fourth wave begins".¹⁹ The fourth wave offers both an invocation and somewhat an advocacy of particular postfeminist characteristics, whilst resisting others. The recurring issues, informed by and entangled with postfeminism, that will become significant to my analysis of the fourth wave's visual and artistic practices in chapter four are: the public display of bodies with an emphasis on choice, agency, autonomy, confidence and empowerment, especially regarding sexualisation and self-objectification and conforming to heterosexual male desires, which sits alongside self-surveillance, regulation and monitoring, with a particular focus on the internal self and individual. This is summarised by Gill who maintains that "the patterned nature of the contradictions is what constitutes the sensibility,

¹⁹ Rivers 2017, p. 16.

one in which notions of autonomy, choice and self-improvement sit side-by-side with surveillance, discipline and the vilification of those who make the ‘wrong’ ‘choices’”.²⁰ These contradictions are particularly exposed by the online censorship of female and marginalised bodies, which I discuss in chapter four.

Notably, the incorporation of postfeminist themes within fourth wave visual culture can neutralise its political force, aligning it more closely with neoliberalism and capitalist consumerism, particularly in relation to notions of choice and empowerment, as demonstrated by my analysis of fourth wave depictions of the nude in chapter four, whilst also reinforcing and shoring up such conditions. Nevertheless, fourth wave visual culture reacts against postfeminism, as well as the ways in which feminism is taken for granted and the perception that it is common sense or no longer required, by highlighting the persistent presence of misogyny and sexism and the continued need for feminism through its visual and artistic practices. This is shown by the continued emphasis on consciousness-raising and speaking out against sexual violence within feminist art, for example *Chalk Back*, which I discuss in chapter three. However, in an era that can be characterised by a postfeminist sensibility, the resistance of certain conditions does not alter the power structures which entrench and enable them.

In the fifteen years since Gill conceptualised the “postfeminist sensibility”, she has marked a number of ways in which it has changed and evolved. Gill argues that postfeminism has

²⁰ Gill 2007, p. 163.

intensified and “tightened its hold upon contemporary life and become hegemonic”, making it more difficult to recognise as a “novel and distinctive sensibility”.²¹ It has also become the “new normal, a taken-for-granted common sense that operates as a kind of gendered neoliberalism” and is more troubling for this.²² Notably, surveillance has become a more central part of postfeminism, which is reflected both in the online censorship that the fourth wave experiences and the impetus on self-regulation and surveillance *within* feminist visual culture, both of which I discuss in chapter four. Notably, the surveillant gaze is expanding and intensifying and going beyond the surface of the body with the requirement to self-surveil being amplified by social media and digital cultures.²³ Furthermore, postfeminism is increasingly focussed on cultivating the “right” kinds of psychic dispositions, such as confidence, resilience and a positive mental attitude, to address social injustices in ways that are not disruptive by requiring self-regulation and monitoring and are aligned with neoliberalism, capitalism and patriarchy, thus exerting a “powerful regulatory force”.²⁴ This shift in postfeminism to increase the focus on the internal self has informed a number of feminist (visual) practices in which the emphasis is placed on individual internal labour to tackle internalised misogyny or patriarchal standards, rather than transforming or dismantling the structures which enforced such internalisation in the first place, as I explore in more detail in relation to psychic regulation within fourth wave visual culture in chapter four. By requiring women to work on their characters and psychic dispositions, postfeminism also works to attempt to regulate what and how women are enabled to feel and what

²¹ Gill 2017, p. 606.

²² Gill 2017, p. 609.

²³ Gill 2017, pp. 616-17.

²⁴ Gill 2017, pp. 606 and 618.

emotions should be presented.²⁵ Indeed, vulnerability and neediness are required to be repudiated and anger and insecurity are systematically outlawed.²⁶ Whilst in some ways fourth wave visual culture resists this policing of emotions by explicitly representing rage and anger, depictions of empowerment and positivity (for example, body positivity, which I discuss in chapter four), particularly on social media, can efface feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, thus aligning with this form of gendered neoliberalism. This encompasses how the fourth wave both challenges and is shaped by postfeminism and the impact that this entanglement has on feminist praxis and visual culture.

3.3 Popular Feminism

Due to the recent resurgence of feminist activism, feminism has become increasingly visible and, in many ways, popular, as evidenced by the virality of particular online feminist campaigns, such as #MeToo. Sarah Banet-Weiser terms this hyper-visible and commodifiable iteration of feminism “popular feminism”.²⁷ She argues that feminism is popular in three senses: it manifests in discourses and practices that circulate and are networked across all media platforms, particularly online, thereby providing widespread accessibility, it signifies the condition of being liked or admired by like-minded people and finally, drawing on the work of Stuart Hall, the popular is a “terrain of struggle” in which competing demands struggle for power, with some feminisms becoming more visible than others.²⁸ Therefore,

²⁵ Gill 2017, p. 618.

²⁶ Gill 2017, pp. 610 and 619.

²⁷ Banet-Weiser 21 January 2015 [<http://culturedigitally.org/2015/01/popular-misogyny-a-zeitgeist/>], accessed 12 November 2019; Banet-Weiser 2018.

²⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 1.

there are exclusions which lead to popularity, as popularity also encompasses cliques and exclusionary practices, where those who do not conform to the norms of the group, which in the case of popular feminism are white, middle-class, cisgender and heteronormative, are excluded.²⁹ This is reflected in hyper-visible fourth wave art and visual culture, which often centres on whiteness, binary gender and heteronormativity, as well as those who are middle-class, slim, conventionally attractive and non-disabled.

Unlike postfeminism, popular feminism explicitly embraces feminist values and ideologies and is committed to recognising the persistence of gender equality.³⁰ This challenges the postfeminist suggestion that feminism is no longer required and outdated. However, whilst post and popular feminism may initially seem oppositional, they are entangled, mutually sustaining and share structural similarities.³¹ Postfeminism is not displaced by popular feminism, but rather bolstered by it, thereby remaining dominant in contemporary culture.³² Indeed, Banet-Weiser argues that “the feminist visions that come into dominant view in the current moment are shaped by the same affective politics that shape postfeminism: entrepreneurial spirit, resilience and gumption”.³³ All of which are evidently intertwined with neoliberalism, which is a central part of both post and popular feminism. For example, as highlighted by Banet-Weiser, popular feminism uses media and networks to restructure

²⁹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 13.

³⁰ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 20.

³¹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 20. Popular feminism also intertwines with commodity and celebrity feminisms, due to its popularity and visibility. #MeToo demonstrates how multiple feminisms can overlap and intersect within a single campaign or movement, ranging from the activist and politically engaged to the popular, celebrity and commodifiable.

³² Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 20.

³³ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 20.

feminism to focus on the individual rather than collective politics.³⁴ Notably, the fourth wave responds to and sometimes is caught up in similar media and networked tactics. Therefore, there is a need for an academic intervention which centres on the visual, as this thesis does, in order to explore how the fourth wave artistically responds to and is shaped by the entanglement of the individual and collective, extending the work of scholars like Banet-Weiser.

Banet-Weiser maintains that “by commodifying and making feminism ‘safe’, popular feminism resists structural critique”.³⁵ In trying to appeal to wide audiences and be publicly visible, the fourth wave can similarly limit its political potential by stopping short of conceptualising the dismantling of power structures, as demonstrated by the limitations of speaking out against sexual violence within feminist art I discuss in chapter three. Nevertheless, the fourth wave typically offers structural critique and so goes beyond popular feminism, whilst benefitting from its visibility and popularity, as shown by campaigns like Chalk Back.

A central part of this is the “economy of visibility”, within which, as demonstrated by Banet-Weiser, popular feminism circulates with ease.³⁶ Similarly, the fourth wave, alongside other feminisms, compete within, navigate, rely on and benefit from this economy, thus an examination of the visual and (in)visible within fourth wave feminism is evidently necessary.

³⁴ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 32.

³⁵ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 16.

³⁶ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 10.

Indeed, it is central to my discussions of the limitations of speaking out against sexual violence within feminist art and the (in)visibility of particular bodies in chapters three and four, respectively. Banet-Weiser defines this “economy of visibility” as a media landscape and technological and economic context devoted to numerical accumulation, in which visibility is an end in itself, as opposed to a means to an end.³⁷ “The spaces of an economy of visibility are networked [mediated] spaces, interconnected nodes between and within multiple media platforms and where profit is in some ways contingent on number of views”, for example social, digital and mainstream media, the spaces where feminism becomes popular and visible.³⁸ Within an economy of visibility, popular feminism’s accessibility through its online numerical accumulation is central to its popularity, which is facilitated and measured by its ability to reach visibility.³⁹ In some ways, fourth wave feminism attempts to disrupt this focus on popularity by often embracing negative stereotypes of feminists through its visual and artistic practices, as I explore in chapter five. However, the very functionality of social media relies on popularity and visibility, which the fourth wave relies on and benefits from, with the never-ending search for more digital engagement. This perhaps results in the diluting or simplifying of beliefs to appeal to wider audiences and avoid conflict and division, as I demonstrate in relation to depictions of intersectionality and inclusivity in chapter four.

³⁷ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. ix-x, 2 and 23.

³⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 27.

³⁹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 10.

Within this capitalist and corporate economy of visibility, media-friendly, palatable and commodifiable feminist expressions which are invested in neoliberal feminism, whiteness, cisheteronormativity, dominant gender norms and class privilege and resistant to structural critique are rendered spectacularly visible, whilst politically-engaged feminisms that challenge systemic oppression and inequities are obscured and eclipsed, as became evident during #MeToo which I discuss in chapter three.⁴⁰ Furthermore, “the sheer popularity of popular feminism provides spaces for a specific kind of political action along themes that resonate within an economy of visibility, such as empowerment, confidence, capacity and competence”, as argued by Banet-Weiser, which is also reflected in fourth wave visual culture, especially depictions of the nude, as I explore in chapter four.⁴¹ Through examining fourth wave depictions of the nude, I trouble this focus on visibility, empowerment and confidence within fourth wave feminism and the implications it has for political praxis. Nevertheless, an economy of visibility can convey the importance of feminism to a wide audience, with the visibility of popular feminism largely about making what is hidden and normalised more visible and explicit.⁴² This manifests as a form of consciousness-raising within fourth wave visual culture and artistic practices. Nevertheless, whilst online feminisms, both popular and activist, can ensure greater visibility of feminist issues which raises awareness and consciousness, this does not necessarily extend beyond visibility into politics and structural change, as I argue in relation to Chalk Back in chapter three.

⁴⁰ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 4, 11, 13, 16, 31, 52 and 133; Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019, p. 7.

⁴¹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 3.

⁴² Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 31 and 37.

3.4 Backlash?

The notion of the “backlash”, the idea that surges of feminism and perceived progression towards gender equality result in a counter-attack, continues to have great currency.⁴³ Susan Faludi claims that such backlashes are episodic and come in resurgences, triggered by the perception that women are making great strides.⁴⁴ Post-second wave, this took the form of a “power counter-assault on women’s rights, a backlash, an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women”, whilst situating feminism and steps towards gender equality as the source of women’s problems.⁴⁵ Faludi furthers this by suggesting that during times when feminism is at a low point, women become reactive, covertly and privately, struggling to assert themselves against the dominant tide, but when feminism then takes on a more dominant position, the opposition resists, creating “counter-currents and treacherous undertows”.⁴⁶

However, as highlighted by Banet-Weiser, backlash implies a linear direction of “lashing back”.⁴⁷ Consequently, I maintain that it is more complex than this linear framing suggests, which, in turn, further challenges the linear framing of feminist waves. Feminist resurgences co-exist with, respond to and are shaped by misogynies and anti-feminisms. They do not exist without each other in their own distinct temporality. For example, in 2018, during Donald Trump’s presidential term, a record number of women were elected to the US House

⁴³ Faludi 1993.

⁴⁴ Faludi 1993, p. 13.

⁴⁵ Faludi 1993, p. 12. Some scholars argue that the third wave emerged in response to this backlash, for example Evans 2015, pp. 1, 22-23 and 60.

⁴⁶ Faludi 1993, p. 15.

⁴⁷ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 36.

of Representatives during the mid-term elections, including a number of historic firsts such as the first Muslim women elected to congress, Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib. Moreover, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez became the youngest woman to be elected to congress.

Meanwhile, a number of states enacted abortion restrictions and bans and Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court, despite allegations of sexual assault, which solidified an anti-abortion majority on the court leading to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in June 2022. This exemplifies the push and pull of the contemporary context and the coexistence of feminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms which compete for visibility and attention. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how this shapes contemporary feminist art and visual culture and how the fourth wave responds to this landscape through its visual and artistic practices.

Faludi claims that the backlash is largely invisible, only occasionally showing its head.⁴⁸ But, I argue, as feminism has become increasingly visible, revitalised misogynies and anti-feminisms have simultaneously gained visibility, especially within the digital sphere.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine whether the supposed rise of misogyny and anti-feminism resulted in the feminist resurgence termed the fourth wave or *vice versa*. There is no clear starting point as the interaction between the two sides is longstanding, complex and not linear. Rivers maintains that:

The arrival of the fourth wave is [...] intrinsically linked to the surge of misogyny and its attempts to disrupt or disturb this, as well as challenging a Western cultural reliance on the apparently 'reassuring' trope of postfeminism, rather than a symptom of postfeminism(s) demise.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Faludi 1993, p. 15.

⁴⁹ Rivers 2017, p. 34.

This further exemplifies the coexistence and entanglement of fourth wave feminism, misogyny and postfeminism and the contemporary battleground within which feminism is situated. Indeed, the fourth wave is forced to operate in the same spaces and exist alongside misogynies and anti-feminisms, especially online, which significantly informs fourth wave art and visual culture and shapes how feminist artists respond to these hostile forces.

3.5 Popular and Networked Misogyny

Alongside the heightened visibility of feminism, misogyny remains rampant and according to Banet-Weiser, popular, which the fourth wave navigates and battles.⁵⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner define popular misogyny as:

A basic anti-female violent expression that circulates to wide audiences on popular media platforms. This popular circulation helps contribute in heightened ways to a misogynistic political and economic culture, where rape culture is normalised, violent threats against women are validated and rights of the body for women are either under threat or being formally retracted.⁵¹

It also works to shore up hegemonic masculinity and reset the gender balance and seek affirmation and validation to combat feelings of subordination and inferiority, whilst systematically objectifying, devaluing and dehumanising women.⁵² As outlined by Banet-Weiser, popular misogyny is popular in the same three ways as feminism and similarly circulates within an economy of visibility, yet it is also a structural force, reified in institutions and often expressed as an invisible and commonplace norm.⁵³ Moreover, similar

⁵⁰ Banet-Weiser 21 January 2015 [<http://culturedigitally.org/2015/01/popular-misogyny-a-zeitgeist/>], accessed 12 November 2019; Banet-Weiser 2018.

⁵¹ Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016, p. 172.

⁵² Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. xi, 2 and 156.

⁵³ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. xi-xii, 2 and 32.

to popular feminism, popular misogyny is a networked structure and system of interconnected nodes, rather than distinct expressions or outbursts, existing along a continuum, with more extreme and violent nodes connected to and supporting milder or more institutional forms.⁵⁴ In 2018, Banet-Weiser suggested that the current moment is remarkable for the heightened presence of popular misogyny, as between 2012 and 2017 it became normalised online and offline and often expressed in violent ways, no longer at the fringe but rarely acknowledged as misogyny.⁵⁵ Therefore, it is a central part of the landscape of the fourth wave case studies I analyse in this thesis and by which the fourth wave is shaped, responds to and navigates. Online, this is heightened by networked misogyny.

Networked misogyny, part of popular misogyny, is defined by Banet-Weiser and Miltner as a phenomenon of an especially virulent strain of violence and hostility towards women online.⁵⁶ As argued by Banet-Weiser, within an economy of visibility, the nodes of networked misogyny connect, support and authorise each other, “from hateful tweets to pickup artist seminars in hotel rooms to revenge porn”, even if they appear distinct.⁵⁷ Consequently, networked misogyny means that the concept itself moves from one node to another, emerging in different spaces with varied manifestations.⁵⁸ The way it moves and shifts makes it difficult to grasp and tackle, thus the fourth wave becomes reactive and is constantly one step behind in its response. Also, feminists must operate in some of the same

⁵⁴ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 2, 36 and 118.

⁵⁵ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 184.

⁵⁶ Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016, p. 171.

⁵⁷ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 118 and 132.

⁵⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 34.

spaces as networked misogyny, undermining the relative safety offered online. The spaces in which feminist visual culture is circulated, consumed and responded to.

As I have asserted, in the contemporary moment there is a coexistence of feminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms, all of which compete for prominence and attention, forming a battleground between them, particularly online. This is supported by Banet-Weiser who contends that there is a deeply entwined relationship between popular misogyny and feminism, battling it out and living alongside one another “as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility”, which is the backdrop to and battlefield for struggles between popular feminism and misogyny.⁵⁹ The fourth wave navigates and negotiates this volatile landscape, using significant time and resources responding to and defending themselves from attacks. According to Banet-Weiser, the intensification and popularisation of misogyny in the current moment is in part a reaction, response and challenge to the networked visibility, widespread circulation and embrace of popular feminism, “mobilising misogyny to compete for visibility within these same mediated networks”.⁶⁰ As highlighted by Banet-Weiser, the economy of visibility allows for the circulation of more popular feminist expressions, which has allowed for the increased visibility of popular misogyny in response, as the visibility of popular feminism allows and demands response from popular misogyny.⁶¹ Such misogynistic reactions against feminism are evident in backlashes against hyper-visible acts of speaking out, such as Emma Sulkowicz’s *Mattress Performance* (Carry

⁵⁹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 2.

⁶⁰ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. xii and 3-4.

⁶¹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 167.

That Weight), which I discuss in chapter three. However, it is not just popular misogyny that reacts and responds to feminism. My analysis of fourth wave visual and artistic practices demonstrates how feminism is pressured to react and respond to misogynies and anti-feminisms, for example in *10 Top Tips to End Rape* and *I Didn't Ask For This*, which I discuss in chapter five, resulting in feminism being in a constant state of pushback. This further challenges the linear framing of the backlash, by exemplifying the coexistence of and interactions and entanglements between feminisms and misogynies, as opposed to being distinct periods which neatly follow on from one another.

3.6 Anti-Feminisms

Like feminisms, anti-feminisms consist of multiple, coexisting and intersecting strands. It does not just consist of explicitly attacking feminism and feminists but also overtly and covertly opposes the advancement of women and maintains and perpetuates conditions which continue gender inequality; thus, it can be seen as an active undoing of feminism. Indeed, Evans argues that beyond obvious sites of anti-feminism, such as groups like Men Rights Activists who are typically defined as anti-feminist and explicitly articulate an opposition to feminism, anti-feminism is made up of individuals, online communities, people in the government and media and religious groups, as well as individual politicians and media commentators who express anti-feminist rhetoric.⁶² Furthermore, anti-feminist sentiments are not always presented as obvious attacks on women, but rather can take the form of a political or economic policy which would have a disproportionate impact on

⁶² Evans 2015, pp. 14 and 61.

women.⁶³ Cohn demonstrates that with emergent feminisms there has been a rise of anti-feminists and Men's Rights Activists, which are more explicit and visible alongside the increasingly visible feminism, exemplifying their competing for visibility.⁶⁴

Whilst anti-feminism is neither new nor unique to social media, in an era characterised by revitalised misogynies, a concurrent increase in the visibility of more explicit forms of anti-feminism is inevitable, particularly online. Social media enables solidarity, community-building and connectivity for feminists, misogynists and anti-feminists alike. This is particularly evident within the manosphere, which Bates defines as "an interconnected spectrum of different but related groups, each with their own rigid belief systems, lexicons and forms of indoctrination", including incels, pick up artists, Men Going their Own Way and Men's Rights Activists.⁶⁵ They "exist as a kind of living, breathing ecosystem in close, symbiotic relationships with other online communities like white supremacists and trolls", a "vast spiderweb of sites, blogs, forums, chatrooms, groups and social media accounts".⁶⁶ Whilst the manosphere is typically seen as a distinctly online phenomenon, its impact and influence extends far beyond the realms of online social network and discussion forum, Reddit. Bates indicates that whilst the manosphere is seen as a joke and harmless and that the majority of it exists online, unnoticed and unseen, it is extending into the offline world, "taking deeper and deeper root until they're part of the very fabric of our shared

⁶³ Evans 2015, p. 14.

⁶⁴ Cohn 2018, p. 176.

⁶⁵ Bates 2020, p. 5.

⁶⁶ Bates 2020, p. 5.

consciousness”.⁶⁷ Consequently, the fourth wave seeks to expose, usually via social media, the widespread dissemination and normalisation of such anti-feminist and misogynistic rhetoric and ideologies. Therefore, it is necessary to examine how the fourth wave visually and artistically responds to anti-feminisms, as this thesis does.

The interaction between various feminisms and anti-feminisms becomes increasingly complex when viewed in relation to neoliberalism and postfeminist conditions which characterise a contemporary cultural context. Indeed, Cohn asserts that anti-feminist sentiments can be seen as postfeminist in the way in which they project that feminism is no longer required and places focus on individual responsibility, thus being a “more colloquial and blunt way of describing some of the sensibilities of postfeminism”.⁶⁸ This overlapping of anti-feminist and postfeminist discourses becomes particularly apparent in criticisms of Sulkowicz’s *Mattress Performance*, which I examine in the next chapter. Beyond this, the postfeminist sentiment that feminism is no longer required as gender equality has been achieved is extended and distorted within anti-feminism, as it is often perceived that feminism has gone too far and that the tables have turned, so men are now the victims and oppressed group, which Banet-Weiser terms the “funhouse mirror”, which is reflected in accusations of “revenge porn” charged against Bell.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Bates 2020, pp. 4-5 and 10.

⁶⁸ Cohn 2018, pp. 178-79.

⁶⁹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 45.

Furthermore, the relationship between anti-feminism and feminism is furthered complicated when the term anti-feminist is used against those within the feminist movement. As demonstrated by Evans, the term is used against one another as groups and individuals contest the perceived aims and goals of the feminist movement, which is particularly evident in the divides surrounding transgender inclusion and intersectionality.⁷⁰ Rather than acknowledging the longstanding divergences and ideological divides within the feminist movement, boundaries are established that determines what is and is not feminism, ascribing a universal form of feminism. For example, the prominent fourth wave catchphrase “if it isn’t intersectional then it isn’t feminism” is repeatedly purported, without untangling what it means for feminism to be intersectional, as seen in fig. 3. Notably, that “anti-feminism is a charge levelled at feminists by other feminists is indicative of the extent to which the term has been stretched to apply beyond the traditional MRAs”, as argued by Evans and further highlights the overlaps and intersections of feminisms and anti-feminisms.⁷¹ Moreover, as identified by Cohn, some anti-feminist critiques of feminism are criticisms that some feminists have of feminism.⁷² For example, the supposed victimhood and self-victimisation in contemporary feminism evident in the criticisms of Sulkowicz’s performance. This further shows the ideological divides within feminist waves that challenges reductive and homogenising framings, as well as the intersections between feminisms and anti-feminisms, which is reflected in fourth wave art and visual culture and responses to such work.

⁷⁰ Evans 2015, p. 14.

⁷¹ Evans 2015, p. 14.

⁷² Cohn 2018, p. 179.



Fig. 3 @charlotte.illustrates, *If It Isn't Intersectional It Isn't Feminism*, posted to Instagram on 16 June 2020.

3.7 Conclusion

To conclude, the contemporary context is, in part, what defines the fourth wave and distinguishes it from earlier waves. A central part of this landscape can be characterised by the coexistence of multiple intersecting and overlapping feminisms, postfeminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms which compete for visibility and prominence, resulting in exclusions and volatility. The extent to which these coexisting feminist, postfeminist and anti-feminist manifestations overlap and intersect means considering them as completely discrete simplifies this complex landscape which galvanised them into being and allows them to continue to operate alongside one another. Considering these entanglements and

intersections also challenges linear and familial framings of feminist waves. There are not discrete periods of feminism, postfeminism or anti-feminist backlash that neatly follow on from one another. Instead, they messily coexist with hyper-visible competing forces battling it out in the public realm. By examining fourth wave feminism's visual culture and artistic practices in the following chapters, I explore how artists respond to and are shaped by these intersecting and overlapping conditions. Feminists are forced to navigate this precarious, volatile and contradictory landscape in which they are required to constantly push back against misogynies and anti-feminisms that operate in some of the same spaces as them, whilst navigating their entanglement with neoliberal postfeminism and popularity. Meanwhile, the fourth wave also simultaneously draws on and reworks longer feminist art tactics, traditions and tropes in its overlapping and convergence with the second wave, as I demonstrate in this thesis. In this sense, through its art and visual culture, the fourth wave responds to, engages with and is shaped by both the past and the present.

CHAPTER THREE: SPEAKING OUT AGAINST THE UNSPEAKABLE: COMPARING FEMINIST ARTISTIC RESPONSES TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE FROM THE 1970S TO THE PRESENT DAY

4.1 Introduction

Half a century into the anti-rape movement and the silence surrounding sexual violence has been significantly disrupted, largely through the production and sharing of women's personal narratives, a key legacy of the second wave.¹ However, much is unchanged and speaking out remains central to feminist politics and has arguably gained a new currency in the context of social media and the so-called "post-#MeToo" era. Although there is scholarship on the feminist politics of speaking out, how this is manifested in feminist activist art has been overshadowed.² Therefore, this chapter closely examines how forms of speaking out, including consciousness-raising and amplification, manifest in feminist artworks from the second and fourth waves. It asks what this can reveal about fourth wave feminist activism against sexual violence, challenging reductive binaries that are often attributed to the second and fourth waves, such as offline versus online, collective versus individual and public versus private. Moreover, I highlight the entanglement of feminist waves in relation to feminist activism against sexual violence which further disrupts a linear framing. Nancy Princenthal demonstrates that artists during the 1970s who were exploring sexual violence

¹ The anti-rape movement began around 1970 and sought to raise awareness of, change attitudes to and ultimately combat sexual violence against women through a variety of means. Also, rape was reframed as political and a feminist issue by seminal works, such as *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* by Susan Brownmiller (1975).

² For example, Serisier 2018. Whilst the relationship between consciousness-raising and feminist art has been explored (for instance, in the 1996 text *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard) this largely centres on the feminist art movement of the 1970s and the feminist politics of speaking out more broadly are not addressed.

demanded that the “unsayable be said”.³ But what are the implications of feminist artists continuing this demand, in the context of fourth wave feminism and post-#MeToo?

Tanya Serisier maintains that “feminist anti-rape politics is founded on the belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives [in other words, ‘breaking the silence’] can end sexual violence”.⁴ Expanding on this, alongside considering speaking out in relation to Banet-Weiser’s “economies of visibility”, which I discuss in chapter two, public or visible speaking out is often presented as an end in and of itself rather than as a step forward in creating a future in which women’s stories about sexual violence are no longer required. Paradoxically, this coexists with an emphasis on the need for continued speech. It can be argued that such strategies are meaningful on an individual or group level or can help ignite a transient cultural shift or a moment of heightened public awareness (for example, #MeToo being described as a “watershed moment”).⁵ However, it results in a lack of societal or political change, as well as long-term and sustainable collective action to tackle sexual violence. This extends Serisier’s point that:

The problem is not, post #MeToo, or even before it, that people ‘don’t know’ about epidemic levels of sexual violence, just as they didn’t not know about allegations against Cosby or Weinstein. It is that this knowledge doesn’t produce action and is allowed and enabled to be forgotten or accepted as simply the way things are, so that everyone does indeed know about what’s been going on, but this knowledge produced no response.⁶

³ Princenthal 2019, p. 13.

⁴ Serisier 2018, p. 4.

⁵ It is described as such in Burke and Milano 21 December 2017

[<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/dec/21/we-created-the-metoo-movement-now-its-time-for-hertoo>], accessed 5 July 2022. However, Tarana Burke has criticised the use of this term to describe Me Too. For example, Burke 4 January 2019 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP3LaAYzA3Q>], accessed 28 July 2020.

⁶ Serisier 2018, pp. 114-15.

Evidently, the assumption that speaking out solves sexual violence is undermined by the lack of change over the last fifty years. Indeed, Serisier highlights that a central paradox is that “breaking the silence, despite its significant cultural impact, has not ended sexual violence, nor does it seem to have significantly reduced it, or to have eradicated the stigmas associated with being a rape victim”.⁷ This contradicts the central tenets of the feminist belief in speaking out, outlined by Serisier, which are that:

It promises to produce cultural change by shifting public understandings of rape to more closely reflect the experience of survivors; it assists the collective liberation of survivors by chipping away at the stigma and shame of rape; and it produces individual empowerment for the speaker by having her story heard and herself recognised as an expert on the basis of her experience.⁸

During the second wave, feminism created spaces, an environment, community and discourse in which women’s stories and experiences could be heard, believed, validated, supported and amplified, for example speak outs and consciousness-raising groups, which then called new narratives into being by enabling more women to speak.⁹ Serisier demonstrates that the widespread cultural acceptance of the necessity of speaking out as a response to rape, a key legacy of the second wave, has resulted in survivor accounts moving from feminist-defined and controlled spaces and disseminating beyond the political and discursive bounds of feminism, becoming an increasingly “mediatised and mediated process”.¹⁰ Social media has provided a space in which speaking out can be enacted, amplified and heard whilst circumventing legal and media domains. Serisier shows that in recent years online feminist speech and hashtag activism have appeared to offer the

⁷ Serisier 2018, p. 12.

⁸ Serisier 2018, p. 6.

⁹ Serisier 2018, pp. 6-8 and 145.

¹⁰ Serisier 2018, pp. 4 and 11-12.

promise of a more open platform for women to speak and be heard, with social media causing an “an increased belief in the necessity and power of speaking out”.¹¹ This further suggests that there is now a heightened expectation or pressure to speak out. This is evident in the exhortations of prominent Instagram feminist and artist, Florence Given, who states “silence and complacency in situations of injustice make you complicit in the violence. Speak up. Say something. Your words have the power to change the fucking world”.¹² She also sees the power of speaking out in being able to “unravel years of carefully woven structures that are in place to protect men and their actions, which they are still yet to be held accountable for”, within a society and culture that functions on and reinforces women’s and victims’ silence.¹³ Despite such sentiments, the same vulnerabilities and risks that come with speaking out offline are unavoidable online, such as disbelief and scrutiny, even within online feminist spaces.

If this current era can be understood as post-#MeToo, then contextualising speaking out, as well as collective forms of feminist speech such as amplification, in relation to #MeToo is necessary for my later discussion of how these practices manifest in feminist artistic and visual practices. Therefore, the first section of this chapter analyses #MeToo, which allows for an exploration of some of the key issues surrounding speaking out, especially whose voices and experiences are listened to, validated and foregrounded and the relationship between the individual and the collective. In the second section I compare Suzanne Lacy’s

¹¹ Serisier 2018, pp. 91 and 96.

¹² Given 2020, p. 30.

¹³ Given 2020, p. 146.

Three Weeks in May (as well as her 2012 reworking of the 1977 durational performance) to the public art movement Chalk Back. My comparative analysis demonstrates how fourth wave campaigns are continuing the consciousness-raising work of the second wave, rather than totally renegotiating feminism, whilst using social media as a space in which feminist speech can be enacted, amplified and connected. However, I argue that Chalk Back, which is indicative of the fourth wave, positions speaking out and the hashtag activism used to circulate that speech as the solution to street harassment, despite this not being the case. Consequently, the emphasis is placed on connective rather than collective action, which contributes to the precarity and unsustainability of feminist activism against sexual violence. In the third and final section I compare Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry that Weight)* (2014-15) to Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz's *In Mourning and In Rage* (1977). By comparing these two works, I further examine the relationship between the individual and collective and the public and private as well as the use of performance as a form of activism in the context of the second and fourth waves. I also explore the role of the media in relation to both works and how the criticisms of and backlash to Sulkowicz's performance not only mirror longstanding feminist divisions surrounding sexual violence but also exemplify the risks and vulnerabilities of publicly speaking out even amongst feminists.

I have decided to focus on works by Lacy due to the seminal role she played in breaking the silence that shrouded the hidden experiences and conditions of gender-based sexual violence and bringing them to widespread public attention through art. Furthermore, all of the works I focus on merge public art and activism and utilise (social) media, providing access to non-art and non-feminist audiences and garnering wider engagement and

participation. Moreover, both Sulkowicz and Chalk Back use public art to performatively and visually manifest the act of speaking out and in doing so exemplify the limitations, complexities and risks of such practices in the context of the fourth wave, as well as their potentials. Through my comparative analyses I demonstrate the entanglement of feminist waves within feminist activism against sexual violence which disrupts linear and oppositional framings. Also, I challenge the reductive binaries that are attributed to the second and fourth waves, particularly offline versus online, individual versus collective and public versus private. Consequently, I highlight the complexities of and provide a more nuanced insight into the praxis of fourth wave feminism against sexual violence.

4.2 Contextualising Speaking Out in the Context of Social Media and Hashtag Activism: A Critical Discussion of #MeToo

On 15 October 2017 Alyssa Milano (@Alyssa_Milano) tweeted “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”, to indicate the magnitude of the problem. This was in response to two exposés, the first by Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey which detailed Harvey Weinstein’s pattern of predatory behaviour and silencing accusers over several decades.¹⁴ The second was by Ronan Farrow which revealed multiple accounts of sexual assault and harassment allegedly committed by Weinstein.¹⁵ This resulted in what is now described as the #MeToo movement, in which millions of survivors publicly disclosed their experiences of sexual violence or simply posted “#MeToo” to indicate their

¹⁴ Kantor and Twohey 5 October 2017 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html>], accessed 9 November 2021.

¹⁵ Farrow 10 October 2017 [<https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories>], accessed 9 November 2021.

shared experience within the collective story of the hashtag. Although #MeToo was preceded by several prominent hashtag campaigns challenging violence against women, such as #YesAllWomen, none had achieved the same scale of response or level of prominence.

However, the history of the movement extends far beyond October 2017 and reveals the erasure and marginalisation of women of colour during moments of collective speaking out and within feminist movements against sexual violence, even those which they created. Phipps argues that “‘speaking out’ can become ‘speaking over’ a lot of the time. This is not ‘Me, Too’ – it is more like ‘Me, Not You’”.¹⁶ Initially Milano was credited as the creator of the movement, but she quickly received criticism online from women of colour for not acknowledging Tarana Burke, a Black woman who founded the grassroots movement in 2006 to support Black and brown women and girls, with many highlighting the lack of support Burke had received from white feminists over the previous decade.¹⁷

Burke has an ambivalence towards the hashtag and whilst she saw its power in expanding conversations beyond the celebrity, creating hope and inspiration and bringing me too into the public sphere, she distinguishes it from the broader movement and work; the on-the-ground organising to support survivors, particularly Black women and girls, which she sees as necessary to go beyond the moment of the hashtag or saying “me too”.¹⁸ In this sense, as

¹⁶ Phipps 2020, p. 37.

¹⁷ Onwuachi-Willig 2018, pp. 106-07.

¹⁸ Burke 9 November 2017 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/11/09/the-waitress-who-works-in-the-diner-needs-to-know-that-the-issue-of-sexual-harassment-is-about-her-too/>],

conveyed by Serisier, Burke does not limit nor privilege speaking out, but rather sees #MeToo as opening a space for and enabling work, rather than being a guaranteed or fundamental part of the work.¹⁹ Burke distinguishing between the hashtag and broader work shows the tensions, divisions and disconnect between online forms of speaking out and on-the-ground feminism, an issue I explore in more detail in relation to Chalk Back further on.

Despite the movement's origins and being more vulnerable to sexual violence, the struggles of women of colour were rendered invisible within #MeToo. Whilst social media gives anyone, with access, the ability to speak, this does not mean they will be heard, validated or believed. Digital technologies can make speaking out easier, but not easy. Also, it does not mean that the conditions which silence women and render their stories untellable are eradicated. As argued by Katherine Angel "not all speech is equal".²⁰ For example, survivors had been speaking out against R. Kelly for several decades, yet he continued to experience significant success. An exposé in *Buzzfeed* detailing accusations of sexual, physical and emotional abuse and predatory behaviour against R. Kelly broke several months before those on Weinstein but received nowhere near the same level of attention.²¹

accessed 15 November 2022; Ohlheiser 19 October 2017 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2017/10/19/the-woman-behind-me-too-knew-the-power-of-the-phrase-when-she-created-it-10-years-ago/>], accessed 15 November 2022; Burke and Walsh 21 February 2020 [<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/me-too-founder-tarana-burke-discusses-where-we-go-from-here/>], accessed 28 July 2020.

¹⁹ Serisier 2018, p. 116.

²⁰ Angel 2021, p. 7.

²¹ DeRogatis 17 July 2017 [<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jimderogatis/parents-told-police-r-kelly-is-keeping-women-in-a-cult>], accessed 7 December 2021.

Burke also criticised how the media coverage of #MeToo focussed on individually accused men, rather than survivors and the systemic issue of sexual violence.²² This is supported by Banet-Weiser who asserts that “even if the intentions of a campaign are to disrupt sexist structures, when these campaigns circulate in an economy of visibility, the focus of the message is on individual injury, which distracts from understanding the problem as a systemic one”.²³ #MeToo assumes commonality but the collective narrative soon became lost as the media focused on individual high-profile cases, predominantly involving famous white women and powerful men, which often obscured the need for widespread collective action and systemic overhaul.

This hegemonic portrayal of #MeToo also focussed on accountability through exposure and punitive measures, which has a disproportionate impact on marginalised communities. In her book *Me Not You: The trouble with mainstream feminism*, Phipps explores the violence white feminists and women can do in the name of fighting sexual violence, maintaining that the way in which it is tackled and policed is a form of terror and “(white) ‘women’s safety’ is used to justify violence against marginalised communities”.²⁴ Phipps explains that Burke’s critique of #MeToo’s focus on individual “bad” men and wanting to “bring them down” is not about protecting them from accountability but rather is rooted in the knowledge of intersectionality and that strengthening punitive systems will not typically affect privileged white men but would negatively impact people of colour, a concern not shared by white

²² Burke and Walsh 21 February 2020 [<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/02/me-too-founder-tarana-burke-discusses-where-we-go-from-here/>], accessed 28 July 2020.

²³ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 142.

²⁴ Phipps 2020, pp. 3 and 10.

feminists as they do not fear the criminal justice system.²⁵ Rather than dismantling the conditions and structures which create and maintain sexual violence, the focus on individual “bad” men and punitive measures reinforces such power dynamics. Indeed, Phipps suggests that “mainstream white feminism, which uses the corporate media and state/institutional discipline to redress individual injuries, cannot tackle the intersections of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism that produce sexual violence” but instead repeats them.²⁶

A central criticism of #MeToo is that it resulted in little longstanding change, furthering the perception that online activism, particularly hashtags, rarely goes beyond the viral moment.

Lewis argues that:

We need concrete victories that will last in a way hashtag campaigns cannot. The public pillorying of a scattershot crew of outright villains, low-level creeps and the occasional innocent man by the #MeToo movement is no substitute for ensuring full and free access to employment tribunals.²⁷

This lack of change was evident in 2018 when Brett Kavanaugh was confirmed to the Supreme Court despite Dr Christine Blasey Ford speaking out with allegations of sexual assault. This furthered the point that #MeToo did not go far enough as accused men remained in positions of power and there was a lack of structural or legal change.

It can also be argued that #MeToo heightened the pressure on women to share their experiences of sexual violence. Angel maintains that, during the height of #MeToo and its media coverage, women’s speech was not only valourised and “taken as a self-evident and

²⁵ Phipps 2020, p. 78.

²⁶ Phipps 2020, pp. 159 and 164.

²⁷ Lewis 2020, p. 322.

necessary good” but the accumulation of stories online and offline created a sense of expectation, risking making telling one’s stories a duty or requirement.²⁸ This demand intersected with the salacious collective hunger for particular women’s stories, which terms like “trauma porn” encapsulate. This is furthered by Angel who asserts that this appetite was “couched in the language of concern and outrage, one that fit neatly with the belief that speaking the truth is a foundational, axiomatic value for feminism”.²⁹ This contrasts with Burke’s intentions as she expressed that survivors should not tell the details of their experience constantly and they should not have to perform their pain repeatedly to raise awareness.³⁰

Despite the limitations of speaking out, #MeToo demonstrates that there remains great belief in its promises. As highlighted by Kantor and Twohey, Blasey Ford assumed Kavanaugh would be confirmed but saw her achievement as sharing her story, hoping it would make it easier for victims in the future to speak out.³¹ This exemplifies the hope that speaking out can encourage others to come forward and seek liberation, empowerment and agency. However, this perhaps furthers the pressure placed on survivors to publicly share their traumatic experiences, rather than working towards eradicating the need for speaking out. Moreover, Kantor and Twohey assert that it became “a moment of accountability without precedent”, which persuaded more women to come forward as it was believed that their

²⁸ Angel 2021, p. 6.

²⁹ Angel 2021, p. 6.

³⁰ Burke 4 January 2019 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP3LaAYzA3Q>], accessed 28 July 2020.

³¹ Kantor and Twohey 2019, p. 240.

speech could lead to action.³² They identify that there was an understanding among the women they had met and beyond that “if the story was not shared, nothing would change. Problems that are not seen cannot be addressed [...] the emergence of new information was just the beginning – of conversation, action, change”.³³ This further indicates the expectation that women need to share their trauma in order for change to happen and the assumption that speaking out is the solution to sexual violence.

Nevertheless, the use of the hashtag allows for individual stories to be connected to form a single collective story of sexual violence, mirroring earlier feminist practices of consciousness-raising groups and speak-outs, as demonstrated by Serisier.³⁴ This offers individual narratives, which by themselves may be doubted, significance and validation, countering disbelief as part of this collective storytelling.³⁵ Serisier explains that this shifts the focus from the credibility of individual narratives, although they continue to be doubted and scrutinised, to the recognition of structurally gendered harm.³⁶ Indeed, Milano’s initial tweet shows a recognition that using a hashtag to construct a collective story out of individual narratives can show the ubiquity of sexual violence against women. Such benefits of using hashtags to form a collective story link to the notion of amplification.

³² Kantor and Twohey 2019, pp. 2 and 182.

³³ Kantor and Twohey 2019, p. 260.

³⁴ Serisier 2018, pp. 95-96.

³⁵ Serisier 2018, pp. 96, 99 and 103.

³⁶ Serisier 2018, p. 103.

For the purposes of this chapter I adopt Shelley Cavalieri's conceptualisation of amplification, which she defines as an "extralegal strategy of feminist resistance" and is consciously based on the practice adopted by women in the Barack Obama administration.³⁷ During Obama's first term as president, women struggled to be heard, access meetings and exert influence, so they adopted a strategy they termed "amplification", where if a woman made a point, other women would repeat it and give them credit, forcing acknowledgement and preventing erasure and co-option.³⁸ The strategy subsequently became popularised and adopted by women in professional settings and communities across the US.³⁹ Amplification used in response to sexism or sexual violence means women's voices act in concert to credit the words and experiences of each other, "giving force to the voices of other women, rendering their narratives credible and validating their lived experiences", making them "more likely to be valued, respected and believed".⁴⁰ In relation to the events surrounding #MeToo, initially this meant that the experiences of multiple women accusing the same man were given credibility, exposing patterns of predatory behaviour and their impunity.⁴¹ Then the collective story of the hashtag indicated the ubiquity of sexual assault and harassment through the sheer scale of its usage. As argued by Cavalieri, "survivors' claims were believed not because they related to specific individual aggressors, but because the movement

³⁷ Cavalieri 2019, pp. 1489 and 1505.

³⁸ Eilperin 13 September 2016 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/09/13/white-house-women-are-now-in-the-room-where-it-happens/>], accessed 5 August 2020; Eilperin 25 October 2016 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/10/25/how-a-white-house-womens-office-strategy-went-viral/>], accessed 5 August 2020.

³⁹ Eilperin 25 October 2016 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/wp/2016/10/25/how-a-white-house-womens-office-strategy-went-viral/>], accessed 5 August 2020.

⁴⁰ Cavalieri 2019, pp. 1505-06 and 1547.

⁴¹ Cavalieri 2019, p. 1516.

amplified all survivors' experience of assault and harassment as credible".⁴² In the context of #MeToo, amplification also allowed Burke to be credited as the founder of the movement, thereby preventing her erasure and increasing her visibility. Overall, this shows some of the positives of amplification, as a form of feminist speech, particularly within the context of social media and hashtag activism. In this chapter I use the term amplification to account for collective forms of feminist speech, allowing for further exploration of the dynamic between the collective and individual. Evidently, this is a key tension in forms of speaking out against sexual violence, as suggested by Burke in relation to #MeToo, as well as a binary that is often attributed to the second and fourth waves respectively, all of which will become apparent in my comparative analyses.

4.3 Collective Versus Connective Action: Comparing Suzanne Lacy's *Three Weeks in May* and the Art Movement Chalk Back

Both *Three Weeks* and Chalk Back break the silence surrounding the unspeakable, namely rape in the former and street harassment in the latter, speaking out on behalf of survivors through public art. Indeed, Vivien Green Fryd explains that *Three Weeks* "forced discussion about the formerly silent subject of rape".⁴³ In both case studies this is predominantly done by visualising and situating acts of sexual violence, tackling its simultaneous invisibility and mythologisation and raising awareness and consciousness. Fourth wave feminist campaigns like Chalk Back are continuing the consciousness-raising work of the second wave, rather than totally renegotiating feminism, whilst using social media as a space in which feminist

⁴² Cavalieri 2019, p. 1517.

⁴³ Green Fryd 2007, p. 23.

speech can be enacted, amplified and connected. However, I argue that Chalk Back, like the fourth wave more broadly, mistakenly positions speaking out as the end in and of itself, the solution to street harassment. This results in connective rather than collective action, which contributes to the longstanding precarity and unsustainability of feminist activism against sexual violence, whereas Lacy focusses on collectivity. Despite such differences, both projects operate in liminal space, entangling the supposed binaries of art and activism, art and non-art, public and private, individual and collective, hidden and visible and also with Chalk Back, the online and offline and global and local.⁴⁴ This exemplifies the complexities of the fourth wave and its resistance to reductive definitions and oppositional framings of feminist waves. Furthermore, Lacy's contemporary re-enactments of *Three Weeks* highlights Lacy working across feminist waves and how the conceptualisation of the work evolved to adapt to changing contexts, allowing for further consideration of the overlapping of feminist waves.

Chalk Back (@chalkbackorg) describes itself as “an international youth-led chalk art movement against street harassment”.⁴⁵ The initiative was founded by Sophie Sandberg who created the first account (@catcallsofnyc) in March 2016. According to the Chalk Back website the movement now spans six continents, forty-nine countries and 150 cities, with around sixty Instagram accounts.⁴⁶ Therefore, Chalk Back is simultaneously global, transnational, site-specific and contextually flexible. Despite this global presence, the

⁴⁴ In the case of Lacy, this links to Sharon Irish's notion of “spaces between” (2010).

⁴⁵ Stated in the account's Instagram biography. Parts of my discussion and analysis of Chalk Back appeared previously in Morgan 2022.

⁴⁶ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org>], accessed 29 September 2021.

majority of accounts are based in the US and Europe. There are more than 150 activists that form this rapidly growing collective “fighting for equal access to public space”.⁴⁷ Alongside the Instagram accounts, they also run campaigns, community events, public collective chalking events and workshops through which “Chalk Back members seek to influence bold cultural change within our communities”.⁴⁸ The objectives of Chalk Back are “to give people a place to share their stories of harassment, use it to raise public awareness and ultimately denormalise [and eradicate] catcalling”.⁴⁹ The Catcalls Instagram accounts, which form the Chalk Back movement, largely follow the format of @catcallsofnyc. Anonymous accounts of instances of street harassment, which are crowd-sourced and submitted via private message, are written in the form of direct quotations onto the streets where they happened using chalk.⁵⁰ The writings are then photographed and posted it to Instagram to “spur dialogue and story sharing”.⁵¹ The image is often shared alongside the original message they received which adds context or expresses how the victim felt or reacted to the incident, as seen in fig. 4. This articulates the harm caused and/or their agency and identifies the location in which the harassment occurred. Despite @catcallsofnyc having over 170,000 followers on Instagram and Chalk Back experiencing some international mainstream media coverage, Chalk Back has received scant academic attention, which I seek to redress in this chapter.

⁴⁷ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org>], accessed 29 September 2021.

⁴⁸ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org>], accessed 29 September 2021.

⁴⁹ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org>], accessed 29 September 2021. Whilst Chalk Back is predominantly focused on street harassment, the movement sometimes addresses other forms of harassment, such as online, school or workplace harassment.

⁵⁰ Whilst they accept submissions from all genders, the platform predominantly features women and girls’ experiences of harassment committed by male perpetrators. Also, @catcallsofnyc often seeks to draw attention to the intersectionality of some street harassment.

⁵¹ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org>], accessed 29 September 2021.

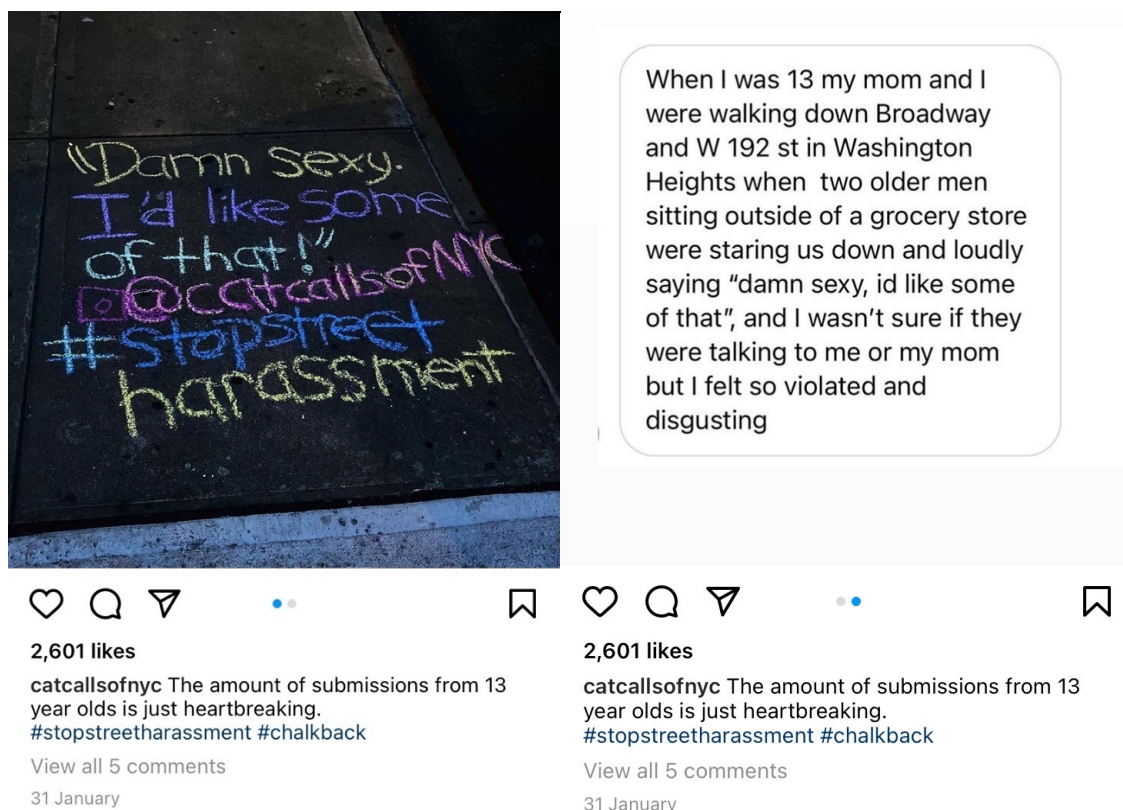


Fig. 4 @catcallsofnyc, 31 January 2021, Instagram post.

Three Weeks in May (8 to 28 May 1977), a seminal public activist programme or “public informational campaign”, intertwined and blurred activism and performance art and integrated Lacy’s work as an artist, feminist educator and organiser in tackling sexual violence.⁵² In collaboration with artists, activists, Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and elected officials, a programme of more than thirty private (for the women’s community), public, art and non-art events was created, consisting of self-defence and rape prevention

⁵² Green Fyrd 2007, p. 31; Princenthal 2019, p. 114. *Three Weeks* opened on Mothers’ Day 1977. Lacy and her subsequent long-standing collaborator Labowitz developed and honed media strategies to reach broader audiences, which broadly fell into two categories: public informational campaigns and media events. Public informational campaigns, of which *Three Weeks* is an example and laid the groundwork for this form, use a variety of media coverage on a specific issue over a longer period, thus providing in-depth information to inform, educate and organise communities, which goes beyond a one-time media event (Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], pp. 401 and 405).

workshops, testimonials, talks, panels and performances, in which media attention was intentionally garnered.⁵³

At the centre of the work were two twenty-five by six-foot yellow maps of LA framed by caution tape situated in City Mall, the subterranean shopping centre directly downstairs from City Hall in downtown LA (figs. 5-6). On one map “daily police rape reports were recorded with a stamped red “Rape”, around each of which nine fainter “rape” stamps were added, representing the estimated number of unreported assaults”, as described by Princenthal.⁵⁴ The stamp declares the occurrence of a rape, making both reported and unreported rapes visible, presenting information not usually seen by the public, thereby forcing the acknowledgement of sexual violence. The daily addition of new stamps constantly changed the maps visuality, as its surface became engulfed and increasingly red as the stamps spread and merged, giving a sense of imminent danger and exposing the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the city.⁵⁵ Lacy would also chronologically recount the incidents of rape that had occurred that day from the police reports. The second map provided contact information of where women could find help and support and as part of the documentation it assembled, the work included the California penal code on rape that “outlined the conditions that would permit a charge to be made”, thus providing material resources to victims, whilst educating and raising awareness.⁵⁶

⁵³ Princenthal 2019, pp. 116-17.

⁵⁴ Princenthal 2019, p. 116.

⁵⁵ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 30.

⁵⁶ Princenthal 2019, pp. 116 and 119.



Fig. 5 Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May, 1977*, performance. City Mall, Los Angeles.



Fig. 6 Suzanne Lacy, *Three Weeks in May, 1977*, performance. City Mall, Los Angeles.

Not only does *Three Weeks* represent a shift in Lacy's oeuvre, defining strategies and processes and creating a model for her subsequent pieces, it also marks a development in performance and feminist art practice from private catharsis to public media events.⁵⁷ Indeed, "a new art form was consciously being birthed", as *Three Weeks* established Lacy's New Genre Public Art, also referred to as the practice of "expanded public pedagogy", which was significant in the development of socially engaged practice and relational aesthetics.⁵⁸ Green Fyrd defines New Genre Public Art as a "socially engaged, interactive cultural practice that deploys a range of traditional and non-traditional media in public spaces for public audiences".⁵⁹ It transforms viewers into participants and even collaborators, informing and engaging audiences on particular issues, intersecting activism, education and theory.⁶⁰ Princenthal argues that whilst this development can be linked to personal and regional circumstances, the "more powerful explanation for the emergence of this hybrid of art and activism is the dawning urgency about bringing attention to sexual violence".⁶¹

Significantly, despite heightened connectivity enabled by the internet, large-scale collaborations and coalition-building between individuals and organisations from separate spheres are not as prominent in fourth wave artistic and activist practices, especially in the context of social media. Oftentimes the focus is predominantly on the individuality of the creator/founder, such as Sandberg, as opposed to the collective and collaborative. Whereas,

⁵⁷ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/three-weeks-in-may>], accessed 4 June 2020; Withers 1996, p. 170.

⁵⁸ Princenthal 2019, pp. 108 and 115; Green Fyrd 2007, p. 23. The term New Genre Public Art was initially coined by Lacy in a performance in 1991 and later developed in *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (1995).

⁵⁹ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 23.

⁶⁰ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 23.

⁶¹ Princenthal 2019, p. 109.

although *Three Weeks* was individually authored, the focus centred on collaboration. This perhaps contributes to the perception that contemporary feminism is more fragmented, pluralistic and individualistic than its predecessors. However, momentary, *ad hoc* social media-based collaborations between an individual artist and an organisation or company or amongst a small number of artists/activists are relatively common. For example, @catcallsofnyc regularly collaborates with other feminist campaigns or initiatives, such as @whyididntreport. Also, many feminist social media accounts use their platform to amplify the voices of other feminist activists by sharing their work or doing Instagram “takeovers” for the purposes of community-building and education.⁶² But, these usually do not extend beyond the feminist sphere (or echo chamber) as Lacy did.⁶³ Consequently, Chalk Back, despite engaging in a number of collaborations, focusses on connectivity rather than collective action, lacking the civic partnerships and coalition-building that Lacy forged through her large-scale works and formalised through *Ariadne: A Social Art Network* (1977-82).

Oftentimes this connectivity within fourth wave feminism does not lead to collective action. Martin and Valenti argue that online feminism needs to be linked with larger organisational movements and all players in the feminist movement (for example, organisers, academics, educators and activists) to make it more sustainable.⁶⁴ This collectiveness in “convening

⁶² Instagram “takeovers” are when the account holder gives access to their account to another social media content creator (who usually has a smaller following) so that they can share their voice and work with a different audience.

⁶³ Echo chambers are an environment, typically on social media, in which people only encounter others who share the same views as them. Therefore, their pre-existing beliefs are reflected back at them. Echo chambers can have a potentially polarising effect, preventing productive dialogue between groups with opposing views.

⁶⁴ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 4.

power and agenda setting” is, they maintain, the key to tackling gender inequality and achieving real social change through relationships, dialogue, shared ideas and resources and morale boosting.⁶⁵ Whilst Martin and Valenti recognise the symbiotic relationship between feminist organisations and online feminists, they identify a critical gap in which organisations have the infrastructure and online feminists have the innovative communicative reach, so larger collaborations are needed to achieve greater impact.⁶⁶ They further this by demonstrating that this infrastructure is needed to connect voices and influence, because whilst online feminism is powerful, it is inadequate by itself and there is a need for organisational and strategic planning and collaborative effort with institutional and on-the-ground feminists.⁶⁷ Indeed, collaborations between online feminism and institutional, local and on-the-ground feminists and organisations are necessary in order to further bridge the gap between the online and offline, as well as to ensure the sustainability of campaigns. Whilst Chalk Back blurs the boundaries between the online and offline through their public art and online activism, there is a lack of collaboration with institutional and on-the-ground feminists. There is also a need to extend beyond the (online) feminist realm and echo chamber, as Lacy does, to have greater offline impacts. The Chalk Back website states “collaboration is key to building solidarity within Chalk Back”.⁶⁸ However, this is referring to collaborations and connectivity between the accounts within the movement, rather than establishing coalitions and collaborations beyond the movement, which would make the movement more sustainable. Yet due to the pervasiveness of echo chambers, it is becoming

⁶⁵ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 10.

⁶⁷ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 26.

⁶⁸ Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org/mil>], accessed 8 November 2021.

increasingly difficult to create spaces in which such collectiveness can occur, thus a proactive, as opposed to reactive, approach is required.

Nonetheless, the precarity of (online) feminist activism results in a lack of long-term planning and proactivity. This is supported by Martin and Valenti who demonstrate that:

The lack of infrastructure and sustainability for the online feminist movement makes it nearly impossible to think about more meaningful, long-term strategising. More than ever, we need to create effective proactive campaigns and policies to prevent sexist encroachment in the first place, rather than being in a perpetual state of pushback.⁶⁹

This reflects the reactiveness of fourth wave art and visual culture, as exemplified by Chalk Back and further exemplifies the need for proactivity. Lacy was responding to a crisis of sexual violence but was proactive in forming networks and coalitions amongst distinct groups and individuals. This forged collective action which provided women with concrete tools and support and interrogated the conditions and myths of rape culture to raise public awareness and dismantle them, as opposed to solely speaking out. Nevertheless, there were also numerous factors, such as a lack of leadership, financial insecurity and internal divisions, that contributed to the unsustainability of feminist activism during the second wave, thus precarity is not unique to fourth wave feminism.

In part, because Chalk Back does not collaborate with (and therefore operates outside of) non-feminist organisations, officials and the police, unlike *Three Weeks*, their work is vulnerable to removal, disruption and legal consequences. In 2019 a member of

⁶⁹ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 22.

@catcallsofnyc was arrested and charged for graffiti and trespassing whilst writing an experience of sexual harassment that was submitted to the account on the pavement in front of the high school in which the incident occurred. The account argues she was unlawfully arrested, violating her first amendment right and that it was reinforcing the silencing and censorship of voices against harassment (fig. 7). The case was later dismissed. Moreover, in early 2020, city workers were instructed by a police officer to wash away the writing that had just been completed, an issue Chalk Back have repeatedly faced, as the police officer deemed it too offensive, whilst also admitting to not understanding the meaning of the work.⁷⁰ In contrast to this, *Three Weeks* sought to facilitate dialogue and coordination between law enforcement and feminist activists. However, by utilising public art, Chalk Back is able to access a much wider audience which extends beyond the echo chamber of their online following and interactions, provoking spontaneous interactions.

⁷⁰ Catcalls of NYC 17 February 2020 [<https://www.instagram.com/p/B8rj-2UBRRC/>], accessed 14 December 2020.

@catcallsofnyc team member who was arrested for raising awareness about harassment. Share this post with #letuschalk on your account. If you missed the full story, read below:

.

Recently, a student at Forest Hills High School contacted @catcallsofnyc with a story of harassment. The student described an encounter where the principal of Forest Hills HS, Benjamin Sherman, exclaimed to a couple female students while passing by them in the hall, "The bigger the hoop, the bigger the hoe!" After receiving this direct message, a catcallsofnyc chalker went to chalk the quote on a public sidewalk outside of the high school. .

.

Without being asked to leave or to wash away the chalk, she was arrested and charged with making graffiti and trespassing. She has a court date on May 1st at Kew Gardens Criminal Court.

.

We believe she was unlawfully arrested and that the case should be dismissed as a violation of the first amendment. Moreover, we believe this arrest contributes to the continued silencing of vulnerable voices against sexual harassment.

[View all 938 comments](#)

24 April 2019

Fig. 7 @catcallsofnyc, 24 April 2019, Instagram caption.

Keller maintains that community-building, necessary for sustaining feminism and enabled by networked technologies, resists dominant discourses of individualism in a neoliberal context, which is significant given the internet is a space that "privileges the individual as entrepreneur and brand".⁷¹ Nevertheless, whilst online solidarity, connections and community can be forged through sharing feminist identity and experiences via digital networked technologies, it can be an unequal relationship built on the platforms afforded to particular privileged individuals or groups, who have the power to selectively amplify particular narratives. In the case of Chalk Back, the individuals who operate the accounts are

⁷¹ Keller 2016, p. 269.

the interlocutors who translate and communicate victims' personal experiences and situate them in the public realm, positioning them as political and in doing so offering a form of external validation to particular narratives.

Martin and Valenti identify a disconnect between voice and influence in online spaces, as there is a diverse range of often marginalised voices in online feminism, but not the structures in place to turn this into a collective influential force (thus there is the need to utilise institutional and on-the-ground feminism to do this).⁷² This further supports my argument that fourth wave feminism often focusses on connectivity rather than collectivity. Nevertheless, Chalk Back seeks to use digital connectivity to transform a range of voices and experiences into a unified transnational force. Moreover, by situating themselves as a global decentralised movement, Chalk Back does not place overemphasis on a single individual, but rather portrays themselves as a pluralistic collective. However, Sandberg remains a visible figurehead of the movement, particularly on the @catcallsofnyc account, which remains the largest and most influential. Martin and Valenti highlight that "if feminist movements don't create support spaces, the leadership pipeline will grow smaller and more insular and fewer voices will get promoted", as only the privileged few who have the time and ability to work unpaid will be able to continue.⁷³ There are certain benefits to having an identifiable leader, such as functioning as a spokesperson or figurehead and allowing for strategies and plans to be enacted from the top down. But it can result in the privileging of a select few who are

⁷² Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 25.

⁷³ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 22.

typically privileged in other ways (white, middle-class, educated and non-disabled) and it places weight onto a few individuals.

As Lacy undertook the organisation of *Three Weeks*, she delineated what she referred to as four major “audience-groupings” or constituencies, which consisted of: elected public officials, feminist activists, women artists and media representatives.⁷⁴ Lacy used community-organising strategies and existing contacts to establish networks within each constituency, the identification of which emerged whilst putting the piece together and responded to political necessities of the project, shaping the direction and structure of the evolving work.⁷⁵ All of these groupings could simultaneously create events, serve as audiences and increase political awareness of each other, with the coalitions moulding the programme.⁷⁶ For example, an officer from the LAPD rape detail appeared on an early morning television talk show with a member of the Rape Hotline Alliance.

Evidently, many of the events were covered by the media to enable widespread communication, such as the media conference with the city attorney and deputy mayor. As argued by Green Fyrd, Lacy used the media as a megaphone, which had the ironic effect of transforming the media into a “*de facto* critic of its own lack of attention to rape”.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 31.

⁷⁵ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁶ Lacy [<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 31.

⁷⁷ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 33.

Consequently, the audiences of *Three Weeks* consisted of the general public (both the audiences of the media coverage and of the events) and those from different organisations and spheres, the distinctions between which were consciously blurred.⁷⁸ In facilitating these collaborations in a way that enabled interactions and benefitted the overall programme and its impact, Lacy was able to intertwine art, education, activism and civic action, creating a model for future artistic practices.

As highlighted by Irish, Lacy did not intend to foster an idealistic or “feel-good” community, but rather sought to create spaces and structures for dialogue among the convergence of disparate groups and individuals that address, rather than resolve, difficult issues, with an awareness that dissent and tension would be an inevitable part of such interactions.⁷⁹ On several occasions the premise of the work was challenged or criticised by those who sought to alter or cancel it.⁸⁰ For example, early on the senior commissioner of the LA City Commission on the Status of Women questioned Lacy’s use of maps as she feared it would reinforce racialised notions of criminality and violence by showing a higher number of rapes in Black areas.⁸¹ Lacy explored these objections with the police department and women from rape hotlines and ultimately chose to keep the maps as they were visual images motivating all other political efforts and she felt that women had a right to know when and

⁷⁸ Princenthal 2019, pp. 115-16.

⁷⁹ Irish 2010, pp. 18 and 85.

⁸⁰ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 33.

⁸¹ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 33.

where rapes were occurring.⁸² Notably, Chalk Back has not encountered similar concerns or criticisms due to the vast number of locations in which the movement is active across the world, whilst indicating that sexual harassment occurs everywhere.

Nevertheless, similar questions and concerns have been echoed in subsequent conversations surrounding figures like Clarence Thomas and more recently Bill Cosby and R. Kelly due to the historic vilification and brutalisation of Black men caused by stereotypes surrounding Black male sexuality, resulting in a fear that powerful Black men are being purposefully taken down by accusations of sexual violence. This was evident in Thomas' Supreme Court nomination hearings in 1991 in which he denounced Anita Hill's testimony of sexual misconduct as a "high-tech lynching", thus appealing to racial solidarity and suggesting that "sexual harassment, like the feminism that pointed it out, was a white preoccupation incompatible with antiracism", instantly dividing feminists and antiracists.⁸³ As argued by Crenshaw, Hill was "trapped between an antiracist movement that foregrounded black men and a feminism that could not fully address how race shaped society's perception of black victims".⁸⁴ This is further supported by Allison Jewel in her account of being assaulted by Cosby and the double-bind she experienced between her race and gender, as she explains she struggled with the decision to come forward because of the vilification of Black men and she feared her accusations against Cosby would not only take

⁸² Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 33.

⁸³ Crenshaw 27 September 2018 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/opinion/anita-hill-clarence-thomas-brett-kavanaugh-christine-ford.html>], accessed 6 August 2020.

⁸⁴ Crenshaw 27 September 2018 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/opinion/anita-hill-clarence-thomas-brett-kavanaugh-christine-ford.html>], accessed 6 August 2020.

down a well-loved figure but also undermine the entire African-American community.⁸⁵

Furthermore, this tension between race and gender often means that Black female victims are silenced or neglected, as evidenced by criticisms of #MeToo, which I outline above.

Despite challenges, Lacy shows a deep commitment to network building, which became fundamental to her social art practice. By allowing the work to be shaped by such coalitions, Lacy was able to establish ongoing engaged dialogue and exchanges that would extend beyond the temporality of the work, enabling each grouping to learn and develop from each other. As explained by Lacy:

Political differences between groups were gently overlooked as we attempted to create 'tactful' interfaces between organisations and people who did not always agree on strategy or philosophy [...] We hoped through the exchange with each other, participants would experience a sense of community in spite of their differences.⁸⁶

Lacy was able to obtain a number of political, civic and official endorsements which were publicised to sanction women active in organisations protesting about violence against women, and a number of civic personnel and bodies publicly recognised the seriousness of rape in the city.⁸⁷ In contrast to Chalk Back, which relies on digital feminist connectivity, by establishing civic partnerships and coalitions between disparate groups Lacy was able to

⁸⁵ Jewel 6 March 2015 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/03/06/bill-cosby-sexually-assaulted-me-i-didnt-tell-because-i-didnt-want-to-let-black-america-down/>], accessed 15 November 2022.

⁸⁶ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 36.

⁸⁷ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, pp. 33-34.

work across political and pragmatic differences and with(in) institutions and structures to collectively recognise and work towards tackling violence against women.

Notably, as in the original *Three Weeks*, the 2012 revisitation *Three Weeks in January: End RAPE in Los Angeles* (11 January to 2 February) utilised collaborations amongst different groups and organisations, such as student and art groups, the LA Mayor's office, Code Pink, Peace Over Violence and The Rape Treatment Centre.⁸⁸ Such connections are arguably made easier by the presence of digital networked technologies, as opposed to in 1977 where Lacy laboriously reached out to each individual person or group, through friends and colleagues or through newspapers and phone books.⁸⁹ Moreover, as highlighted by Lacy, the 2012 re-enactment mobilises "young women, men and an intergenerational coalition across the region to consider next steps in an ever-increasingly necessary and prominent, agenda against violence".⁹⁰ This is furthered by Lucía Sanromán who explains that the "redistribution of her participatory, multidisciplinary, activist and civically engaged work extends her tools and methods to new generations of collaborators and organisers".⁹¹ Therefore, in blurring the boundaries between feminist waves, Lacy explores the potentials of intergenerational collaboration in the context of the fourth wave, resisting assertions that this current feminist temporality lacks intergenerational solidarity. In addition to this, in revisiting and reworking earlier works for a contemporary context Lacy explores her own

⁸⁸ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation#/three-weeks-in-january/>], accessed 4 June 2020.

⁸⁹ Princenthal 2019, pp. 115-16.

⁹⁰ Lacy 2012

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5b2594bc575d1f6793780c0/1529189572558/TWIJ_2011.pdf], accessed 22 July 2021.

⁹¹ Sanromán 2019, p. 22.

history and legacy of activism, acting in dialogue with her past self, further forging intergenerational collaboration across waves. This further shows that feminist waves should not be framed as a linear succession of familial generations, but rather examined in terms of their intersections and overlaps.

City Mall was not the first choice of location for *Three Weeks* and was chosen by Lacy reluctantly, yet it ultimately provided opportunities for increased civic involvement and support and media attention and it drew in unlikely members of the public.⁹² Initially it was planned that the work would consist of a single map in a gallery space, but Lacy asked “why talk about rape in an art gallery when one could be raped on the way home from that space?”⁹³ Consequently, the expansion of the performance’s concept and structure would not have happened in a different location.⁹⁴ Green Fyrd argues that the location of the maps in an underground shopping complex indicated the invisibility and visibility of rape, hyper-visible to only those who frequented the space and invisible to those unaware of its existence above ground, dichotomising daily life with the ongoing tragedy of violence.⁹⁵

Coincidentally, both Chalk Back and *Three Weeks*’ “guerrilla event marking sidewalks throughout the city with Phranc and Judith Loischild” (fig. 8), infiltrate the public space at

⁹² Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 32; Irish 2010, p. 64.

⁹³ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/three-weeks-in-may>], accessed 4 June 2020.

⁹⁴ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 32.

⁹⁵ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 30.

street level, juxtaposing daily life with representations of violence, making visible incidents of sexual violence that are often rendered invisible.⁹⁶ Notably, in their documentary footage, @catcallsofnyc remark on how the public often ignore the writings on the pavement, reflecting (the lack of) responses to instances of street harassment.⁹⁷ However, Chalk Back's writings could make viewers feel witness to that harassment, yet they are unable to intervene as it has already happened, thus making the viewer question their own passivity. The street marking in *Three Weeks* uses red chalk to identify the date and location in which a rape occurred and mark the outline of a woman like a crime scene, with a flower left in the centre. This identifies the presence of someone no longer there, perhaps alluding to the impact of sexual assault on survivors. Both mark the pavements in the location in which the incident occurred, challenging myths that sexual violence only occurs in certain locations by highlighting that it can happen anywhere. Indeed, Irish explains that "the outline of a body on a sidewalk provided a graphic 'you are here' marker of violence and activated new meanings in locations they may never have been associated with violence in most people's minds".⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/three-weeks-in-may>], accessed 4 June 2020.

⁹⁷ Catcalls of NYC 18 July 2019 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3aoYC9MCp0>], accessed 29 September 2021.

⁹⁸ Irish 2010, p. 64.



Fig. 8 Suzanne Lacy with Phranc and Judith Loischild, *Three Weeks in May*, 1977, performance. Los Angeles.

The infiltration of the public space with explicit representations of sexual violence are impactful in their confrontational nature. It shocks and outrages viewers to provoke action whilst taking away the choice of people to encounter such issues in the way that victims have been stripped of that decision, which is an issue that @catcallsofnyc have grappled with. Online, @catcallsofnyc include “trigger warnings” when there are explicit references to rape, yet in offline public spaces this is not possible and they want to share such stories word for word. Moreover, the inclusion of “trigger warnings” can be seen as an online mechanism to foster safe spaces, particularly for survivors. However, they may just give an “illusion” of protection or safety, as argued by Roxane Gay.⁹⁹ Green Fyrd maintains that Lacy used

⁹⁹ Gay 2014, pp. 149 and 151.

duration, immediacy and proximity to stimulate audience's emotional responses to the subject matter as a means to inspire political action and changes.¹⁰⁰ Several months after *Three Weeks* there were reports that other women's groups in the US were using such graffiti tactics to show the occurrence of rape.¹⁰¹ Similarly, the ongoing international work of Chalk Back in physical and digital spaces, the immediacy of their work in the public space both on and offline and its proximity both in subject matter and location are a vehicle for mobilising support and consciousness, thus continuing the work of artists like Lacy.

The use of handwriting in both cases provides a sense of embodied existence, in which the identifiable mark of a person is made as a proclamation of presence and agency. In the context of Chalk Back, the online documentation places physical action and corporeality in the digital sphere. Although the victims are not the ones to mark the pavements in either case, the mark of someone's presence serves as a statement of solidarity with the survivors, reclaiming the public space on their behalf and amplifying their experiences. Handwritten testimonials are also prevalent in Lacy's performance as part of *Three Weeks*, entitled *She Who would Fly* (handwriting and handwritten testimonials are a recurring feature in Lacy's work). The first part of which consisted of Lacy being witness on two afternoons as women came to the gallery to tell experiences of sexual violation that they wrote onto paper and attached to maps of the US that covered the room, and which were subsequently read out in the final part of the performance. This similarly involves the amplification of such narratives, rejecting enforced silence. But, in *She Who Would Fly*, the victims were able to express their

¹⁰⁰ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Ariadne [<https://www.againstviolence.art/twim-guerilla-action>], accessed 1 November 2021.

experiences in their own words. Whereas Chalk Back, despite visualising the act of speaking out, only uses the words of the perpetrator in their street writings. This perhaps reinforces the silence and assumed passiveness of the victim in the offline public space. However, by including the submission they receive in the Instagram post, the voice of the victim is positioned alongside the words of their harasser, thereby giving them a platform to express the impact of such experiences and their agency. This also functions as a form of amplification as the victim's speech is repeated, lending them credibility and validation. Nevertheless, it further places the emphasis on speaking out, which Chalk Back positions as a solution to street harassment. Therefore, it is implied that those who choose not or are unable to speak out are not helping to create change.

Despite this, the use of direct quotations in Chalk Back, which are often threats of sexual violence and are regularly targeted at girls who are below the age of consent in the US (which is typically only noted in the submission), helps to dispel myths surrounding victim-blaming and the view that women should find cat calls flattering or harmless. Sometimes the stories are about incidents that happened recently, which can be immediately submitted due to the affordances of mobile technologies. On other occasions, they are experiences that happened months or even years prior to the women speaking out, reflecting other recent high-profile cases, such as allegations against Weinstein and Cosby. Notably, submissions will often begin with a rhetorical statement, such as "I don't know if this qualifies", demonstrating how street harassment is dismissed as something harmless or insignificant and shows a sense among victims that their experience does not fit within the genre of narratives that are tellable or serious enough (fig. 9). Similarly, in *Three Weeks Lacy*

expresses how the map and project is about women sharing realities of their experiences and exposing facts enables the myths of rape culture to be broken down, particularly those concerning victim-blaming.¹⁰² Indeed, *Three Weeks* grounds rape in reality and thus challenges the myths that fuel victim-blaming, for example by showing that rape can occur in any location and at any time of the day.



Fig. 9 Submission to @catcallsofnyc, posted to Instagram on 24 January 2021.

Many of the issues presented and explored in *Three Weeks* were previously unknown to the general public, thus by cultivating strategies which employed the media, Lacy was able to educate audiences and stimulate change by raising consciousness of an entire community, not just women, to provoke action.¹⁰³ Furthermore, through her re-enactments and partial

¹⁰² Lacy 1977, p. 67, from a transcript of a speech given by Lacy on 25 May 1977 as part of *Three Weeks in May*.

¹⁰³ Princenthal 2019, p. 119; Green Fyrd 2007, p. 33.

recreations of *Three Weeks*, Lacy is able to extend the awareness raising function and relevancy of the work into a different temporality by connecting it to contemporary concerns and issues, demonstrating that action and awareness is still required.

Indeed, since 2007, Lacy has revisited earlier projects to “expand their networks and dialogues and to place them in new political and social contexts”, allowing her to “layer experiences and draw connections between past inequalities and present attitudes”.¹⁰⁴ The 2012 re-enactment, *Three Weeks in January*, which consisted of fifty public and private events covered extensively by print and television media, not only recreated key aspects of the original work but also focussed on the contemporary moment and the issues and new organising strategies this presented.¹⁰⁵ The social media campaign *I Know Someone, Do You* was also the name of the sound installation playing stories of survivors from a bench near to the map installed in front of the police department, created by Bruno Louchouart.¹⁰⁶ One of the concluding performances, entitled *Storying Rape*, featured new and old media in the form of a choreographed conversation located at the top of LA City Hall. Nine leaders in media, city politics, theory, service, law enforcement and activism considered how narratives describing rape are presented in different spheres and how reframing these might aid public understanding of violence against women and yield new insights into violence prevention and “opportunities for persuasion that might be found in alternative narratives”.¹⁰⁷ Lacy

¹⁰⁴ Brier, Cesario, Fabio, Shoolery and Zimbardo 2019, p. 147; Fabio 2019, p. 125.

¹⁰⁵ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation#/three-weeks-in-january/>], accessed 4 June 2020. Lacy also did a partial re-enactment of the original *Three Weeks* entitled *Three Weeks in May Recreation* (2014) for an exhibition at the Museo Pecci Milano.

¹⁰⁶ Sanromán 2019, p. 19; Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/performance-installation#/three-weeks-in-january/>], accessed 4 June 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/storying-rape/>], accessed 4 June 2020.

termed this a “performance of policy deliberation”.¹⁰⁸ Since the early 1980s, Lacy has staged dialogues as part of her large-scale conversational works, highlighting the importance of initiating in-person dialogue and conversations to the artist. But in this instance, Lacy utilises the affordances of digital technologies to amplify the narratives and extend the reach of the conversations beyond the temporality and locality of the staging. Indeed, located around the outside of this conversation was an audience of fifteen social media reporters who translated the conversation, through their own perspectives, into digital communication for the outside world.¹⁰⁹ This demonstrates how Lacy’s media strategy has evolved and adapted in order to utilise new tools and reach new audiences, exploring the development of feminist activism across feminist waves and decades of anti-rape work and the progress or lack thereof that has been made.

Lacy argues that whilst:

An audience of feminist women and artists might well understand what a flying lamb carcass and fourth red-stained women Valkyries had to do with rape [in *She Who Would Fly*]: I was fairly certain that a red-stamped rape map of Los Angeles would carry for meaning for a mass audience

which would capture the attention of the public and then allow them to engage with the work further.¹¹⁰ This tactic is also necessary in the context of social media due to the oversaturation of content and how nuance and implied meanings can be overlooked or

¹⁰⁸ Lacy 2012

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5b2594bc575d1f6793780c0/1529189572558/TWIJ_2011.pdf], accessed 22 July 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Lacy [<https://www.suzannelacy.com/storying-rape/>], accessed 4 June 2020.

¹¹⁰ Lacy

[<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5ad10e54562fa71762eb9fb5/1523650182891/Networking-ArtistsView.pdf>], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 37.

misinterpreted. Therefore, the explicit narratives of *Chalk Back* and *Three Weeks in January* aid the public communication of such issues via social media. Similarly, social media allows for widespread communication and dissemination which extends the work's impact and pedagogy beyond its geographical and temporal reach. Lacy conveys that the original work "had a forceful political imperative: to bring hidden experiences of gender-based violence to public attention [...] In its time, it played a radical role in public exposure", whilst the 2012 revisitation focusses on where LA is in the contemporary moment, collectively bringing a renewed focus and attention to anti-rape activism, thirty years into the movement and examining how such violence against women will be eradicated in the future.¹¹¹

Through the range of events and people and groups mobilised, Lacy connected forms and experiences of violence as a vehicle for consciousness-raising. Lacy maintains that once women recognise their shared experiences, they will begin to speak out, change attitudes and take action to show men the collective lived reality of women, indicating the perceived power of consciousness-raising.¹¹² Similarly, these connections between different experiences of oppression are also enabled by social media, in which singular incidents of misogyny are placed in a broader picture of structural oppression through the creation of collective digital narratives. This is evident in both *Chalk Back* and *Three Weeks in January*, thereby continuing consciousness-raising work that was so central during the second wave. Although *Three Weeks in January* took place several years before major feminist hashtag

¹¹¹ Lacy 2012

[https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5b2594bc575d1f6793780c0/1529189572558/TWIJ_2011.pdf], accessed 22 July 2021.

¹¹² Lacy 1977, p. 67.

activist moments, such as #YesAllWomen and #MeToo, it “underscored the wars social media is transforming organising, allowing for the sharing of live, intimate, direct accounts of personal experiences and laying the foundations for the public to empathise with the victims of rape and condemn perpetrators”, as argued by Sanromán.¹¹³ Second wave feminism encouraged women to rethink their individual experiences as something shared, enabling them to speak as political subjects, by connecting with others.¹¹⁴ Through social media women are now more able to “verbalise and acknowledge their experiences with more clarity” and raise consciousness by connecting shared experiences through wider networks, as demonstrated by Frances Rogan and Shelley Budgeon.¹¹⁵

Evidently, although Chalk Back utilises on-the-ground graffiti tactics and voluntary activists, it is centred on online activist strategies and principles. The street writings include #StopStreetHarassment (which is also included in the captions of the images on Instagram) and the handle of the specific page, clearly designed to fit in a single Instagram image when taken standing up. This provides context to the quotations and publicises the work and aim of the movement and the account associated with the writings. It also encourages viewers to search the hashtag, bringing up thousands of results from worldwide accounts of Chalk Back in which similar experiences are shared. This further exemplifies the power of collective storytelling in demonstrating that these are not just localised isolated incidents but part of a much larger global systemic problem. It also creates a narrative of lived, shared experiences

¹¹³ Sanromán 2019, p. 19.

¹¹⁴ Rogan and Budgeon 2018, pp. 14-15.

¹¹⁵ Rogan and Budgeon 2018, pp. 14-15.

which lends the individual stories significance, credibility and validity and forges solidarity amongst victims. Indeed, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller maintain that the solidarity provoked through hashtag activism “often transforms into a feminist consciousness amongst hashtag participants, which allows them to understand sexual violence as a structural rather than personal problem”.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Chalk Back uses digital connectivity to forge a collective response to street harassment.

The conscious choice of the term “harassment” in the hashtag, as opposed to “cat calls” (like the names of the accounts), clearly seeks to highlight the severity of such experiences by connecting it to other forms of harassment and provides the language for victims’ experiences who may not have originally regarded it as such. Furthermore, Chalk Back’s use of social media and hashtag activism encourages others to share their narratives and provides victims with a framework through which to understand their experiences. Nevertheless, #StopStreetHarassment is a broad hashtag that can be applied to numerous campaigns and it is not specific to Chalk Back nor was it created in response to a specific incident, as is the case with #YesAllWomen and the 2014 Isla Vista mass shooting. Therefore, it is possible that it is used by those unfamiliar with Chalk Back due to its generality, yet as a result it is able to transcend a specific campaign or moment. Hashtags can also help the reader to understand what is being told. In the case of Chalk Back, the hashtag informs viewers that the intention behind writing instances of street harassment in public is to eradicate street harassment rather than solely seeking to share experiences of it. Moreover,

¹¹⁶ Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2018, p. 238.

the inclusion of the hashtag in their street writings encourages viewers who post a photo of the writing on social media to partake in hashtag activism, using offline activism to encourage online activism. Through the prevalence of hashtag activism in fourth wave feminism, the symbol of the hashtag has come to signify more than its digital function. It now symbolises activism, collectivism, solidarity and shared experiences. When it is included in a context where it fulfils no digital function, not only does it mobilise viewers, but it also signifies that the individual story shown is part of a collective narrative. Hashtags are not part of the personal narrative itself but are used to imply that the individual stories share a commonality or sameness.¹¹⁷ Serisier furthers this by arguing that narrative specificity is replaced by a claim to commonality that can prioritise a politics of solidarity, which “enables shared meanings to be constructed out of distinct experiences that may be understood in distinct ways by those who share them”.¹¹⁸

Chalk Back provides a platform for victims to publicly share and re-author such experiences of harassment safely and anonymously, in a mediated way, free from targeted abuse, as a form of healing, providing them with agency and power when in the moment they were silenced and objectified. This extends Mendes, Keller and Ringrose’s point that “disclosing painful personal experiences works as a form of personal healing”, giving them agency in how their voice is heard fostering connection, solidarity, support and comfort.¹¹⁹ This connection, support and comfort is evident in comment sections in which people offer

¹¹⁷ Serisier 2018, p. 100.

¹¹⁸ Serisier 2018, p. 100.

¹¹⁹ Mendes, Keller and Ringrose 2019, p. 1305.

validation, empathy and solidarity, which contrasts the scrutiny victims face elsewhere.

Indeed, Carrie A. Rentschler highlights that “online comment sections reveal the larger networks of support and political affinity that take shape around feminist responses to rape culture online”.¹²⁰

Therefore, the sharing of personal experiences may be individually or collectively powerful, but not necessarily politically and societally impactful. This is supported by Jenny Sundén and Susanna Paasonen who maintain that shared narratives and “the temporary formation of bonds through articulations of sentiment” may be meaningful on a personal and group level, but this does not extend to the societal as they are not directly or automatically translated as political action or mobilised toward social transformation.¹²¹ They maintain that “the power they can attain is of a liminal, transient nature, while their speeds are not necessarily compatible with the much slower rhythm and tempo of social transformation”, which also reflects the difference in speed of the online and offline spheres.¹²² As such, this further demonstrates that speaking out does not necessarily lead to political or social change and is not the solution to sexual violence.

Indeed, although Chalk Back exposes the ubiquity of street harassment by placing individual experiences into a shared narrative through the digital connectivity of hashtags, it presents little in terms of collective action that is needed to eradicate the conditions and structures

¹²⁰ Rentschler 2014, p. 77.

¹²¹ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 40-41.

¹²² Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 41.

which allow such ubiquitous and normalised behaviours to persist. Banet-Weiser asserts that whilst popular awareness of feminist issues is necessary for political practice, it can often be the goal rather than the route to activism.¹²³ The offline political efficacy of feminist hashtag activism or its ability to reach beyond the online feminist community is neither guaranteed nor simple. Whilst some hashtag campaigns have received national or international media attention and perhaps resulted in a level of cultural or social change, others have had less success in bridging that gap between the online and offline. Banet-Weiser maintains that hashtag activism, which is important for raising public awareness, relies upon the logic of economies of visibility and consequently often becomes digitally circulated rather than engaged politically, failing to go beyond the first step and becoming absorbed when a new campaign comes along.¹²⁴ This further demonstrates that speaking out, particularly through hashtag activism, is not an end in and of itself and that knowledge does not necessarily produce action, but can be easily forgotten or accepted as the way things are. The objectives of Chalk Back, which I have already outlined, centre on the power of speaking out to raise awareness of, disrupt and ultimately eradicate street harassment, pointing back to the promise of speaking out within feminist politics that it can solve the problem of sexual violence. Therefore, speaking out and the hashtag activism Chalk Back use to circulate that speech is positioned as the end in and of itself, the solution to street harassment, despite this not being the case.

¹²³ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 183.

¹²⁴ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 141 and 143.

Hester Baer argues that online feminist campaigns are renegotiating feminism for a neoliberalist age by highlighting the interplay of the individual and the collective, enabled by digital platforms, exposing individual experience made collective by structural inequalities.¹²⁵ However, online feminist campaigns like Chalk Back are continuing the consciousness-raising work of the second-wave, rather than totally renegotiating feminism, whilst using social media as a space in which feminist speech can be enacted, amplified and connected. Nevertheless, much of the emphasis remains on individual narratives and experiences, rather than collectivity. In other words, “it is a feminism that says ‘I’m with her’ not ‘we’re with each other’”, as advocated by Banet-Weiser or “me, not you” rather than “me too”.¹²⁶ Such initiatives, like Chalk Back, continue to place responsibility onto the victim to publicly reveal their trauma, reinforcing that these experiences need to be made visible in the digital realm in order for people to acknowledge them, as was the case with #MeToo. Responsibility is not placed on organisations and institutions to forge collaborative action, as with *Three Weeks*, but is placed on the individual to come forward. The name, Chalk Back, also suggests having to stand up and speak against your perpetrator. Moreover, in digitally crowd-sourcing experiences of street harassment, Chalk Back excludes those without access to the internet or the ability to articulate their experiences via social media platforms. This further exemplifies contemporary feminisms’ over reliance on speaking out to solve structural problems pertaining to sexual violence, which neglects silences and the implications of those silences. Furthermore, whilst the experiences shared on Chalk Back

¹²⁵ Baer 2016, pp. 18 and 29.

¹²⁶ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 184. This is in reference to the popular feminist framing of Hilary Clinton’s 2016 presidential campaign slogan “I’m with her”; Phipps 2020.

accounts are anonymised, most of these types of online testimonies are not and risk backlash and abuse. Also, whilst the victims who share their stories with Chalk Back avoid abuse on their personal accounts, they can still witness the inevitable backlash on the Chalk Back account.

Despite the level of safety provided for those who submit their experiences, Chalk Back activists face targeted online abuse and risk confrontation while writing these messages onto the streets, which is often done alone.¹²⁷ Since 2019, @catcallsofnyc film and post the writing process and the encounters that they have with members of the public. Once again, this shows the offline implications of online activist tactics. Many members of the public are highly supportive of their work and others are willing to engage in debate, but others are hostile and dismissive and the activists often face harassment themselves.¹²⁸ Similarly, the conglomeration of audiences for *Three Weeks*, ranging from perpetrators to LA citizens, meant that attitudes towards sexual violence ranged from outrage to indifference.¹²⁹ The individuals who run Chalk Back accounts are also forced to bear the emotional weight of the experiences that are submitted and the accounts are run on a voluntary basis, reinforcing the unpaid and often hidden and unacknowledged nature of women's labour. Whereas *Three Weeks* was co-sponsored by Studio Watts Workshop and the Woman's Building. Nevertheless, raising funds from foundations and corporations to finance her work meant

¹²⁷ Catcalls of NYC 18 July 2019 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3aoYC9MCp0>], accessed 29 September 2021.

¹²⁸ Catcalls of NYC 18 July 2019 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3aoYC9MCp0>], accessed 29 September 2021.

¹²⁹ Green Fyrd 2007, p. 33.

Lacy received little remuneration for her art projects.¹³⁰ Martin and Valenti argue that online feminism needs to become financially stable for the movement to be sustainable.¹³¹

However, the financial situation of feminist art and activism has long been precarious and uncertain, thus further challenging the assertion that the fourth wave is more unstable than its predecessors.

All of this contributes to the risk of burnout, the emotional toll such activism takes on participants and the unsustainable nature of such practices. Through their Media Information Literacy Toolkit, which is an interactive space on their website intended to support activists in the network, Chalk Back somewhat attempts to mitigate the negative effects of online feminist activism by providing guidance on how to deal with trolling, online harassment and hate comments as well as tips for practising self-care, helping one's mental health and establishing boundaries in order to participate in online activism responsibly and sustainably.¹³² But, such "tips" are limited in their ability to mitigate the impacts of continuous online abuse and being confronted with experiences of sexual harassment on a daily basis. Similarly, Irish highlights that:

working so closely with women who had been raped, with daily reminders of the occurrence of more rapes and with overtaxed groups trying to prevent sexual violence as well as to help those who were suffering from its aftereffects, Lacy was emotionally and physically drained by the end of May 1977.¹³³

¹³⁰ Irish 2010, p. 3.

¹³¹ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 32.

¹³² Chalk Back [<https://www.chalkback.org/mil>], accessed 8 November 2021.

¹³³ Irish 2010, p. 67.

Even though *Three Weeks* utilised collaborations with institutions and organisations and gained community and political support, it experienced anti-feminist backlashes in which abortion clinics experienced arson attacks, rape crisis centre workers were sexually assaulted and a woman was brought to City Mall and raped during *Three Weeks*.¹³⁴ Men would also approach the map and make remarks like “now women know where to get their fun” and “is this where the action is?”¹³⁵ This demonstrates how the risks and vulnerabilities of engaging in feminist activism against sexual violence are not unique to the fourth wave nor limited to the realm of social media and have long impacted feminists and the movement more broadly.

Overall, Chalk Back shows how online activism can extend beyond the boundaries of social media platforms and infiltrate the offline world, further complicating the boundary between the online and offline. However, this often stays at the level of connectivity and stops short of collective action, such as collaboration and coalitions between online, on-the-ground and institutional feminisms and that which go beyond the feminist echo chamber, as evident in *Three Weeks*. Such collectivity is required to ensure the sustainability of feminist activism against sexual violence by offering mutual support and sharing expertise and resources. In this sense, Lacy’s works could provide a useful model for these kinds of coalitions and networks, despite the risks that were involved. Evidently, there is a need for intergenerational collaboration and dialogue, where feminists who have worked across multiple waves are utilised, drawing together different expertise and experiences. Finally,

¹³⁴ Princenthal 2019, p. 120.

¹³⁵ Lacy 1977, p. 67.

Chalk Back shows how the fourth wave is continuing the consciousness-raising work of the second wave, whilst using social media as a space in which speech can be enacted, amplified and connected. Nonetheless, this needs to go beyond solely speaking out, as this is not the solution to gendered violence, despite what Chalk Back's aims suggest.

4.4 Speaking Out and the Politicisation of the Personal Through Public Performance

Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance* and Lacy and Labowitz's *In Mourning and In Rage* highlight the use of performance across feminist waves as a form of activism against gendered violence. In other words, the politicisation of the personal through performance. Due to the public nature of both works, the media was central to their development and unfolding. The media storm surrounding *Mattress Performance* exemplifies some of the risks of speaking out even within feminist circles, reflecting longstanding divisions surrounding sexual violence within feminism. There are also some notable differences between *Mattress Performance* and *In Mourning and In Rage*, particularly their desired outcomes, issues relating to individualism, collectivism and collaboration and responses to the works, which expose some of the discontinuities between the second and fourth waves.

Connections have been drawn between Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance* and Ana Mendieta's *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973) and Lacy's *Three Weeks* and Sulkowicz's piece has been situated within the legacy of feminist performance art that emerged out of consciousness-raising in the 1970s.¹³⁶ However, these comparisons have not been explored

¹³⁶ For example, Davis 4 September 2014 [<https://news.artnet.com/opinion/columbia-students-striking-mattress-performance-92346>], accessed 1 July 2021.

in detail. There are certainly a number of similarities between *Rape Scene* and *Mattress Performance*, such as the issue of violence against women on college campuses and the artist's body representing the victim (although, unlike Mendieta, Sulkowicz was dealing with her own trauma).¹³⁷ Therefore, a detailed comparison of *Rape Scene* and *Mattress Performance* is necessary, but it is beyond the scope of this chapter, as I am more interested in public and media driven artistic responses to sexual violence (Mendieta often did not inform people that the work was taking place and the performances were typically only known through the photographs).

Roberta Smith argues that *Mattress Performance* “might be called an artwork of last resort”, a culmination of two years of rage, humiliation and frustration.¹³⁸ Sulkowicz alleges that on the first day of her sophomore year at Columbia University (2012) she was raped by her friend and fellow student Paul Nungesser in her dormitory bed. After initially remaining silent, Sulkowicz later encountered two other women who claimed to be victims of the same man, so all three of them decided to report their assaults to the university in April 2013.¹³⁹ A panel at Columbia investigated the accusations and all three were dismissed due to a lack of

¹³⁷ Whilst she was a graduate student at the University of Iowa, Cuban-born Mendieta did a series of works in 1973 in response to, what she understood as, the rape and murder of nursing student Sara Ann Otten on the college campus in March of that year by another student. For *Untitled (Rape Scene)* she invited unknowing fellow students into the private space of her apartment where they happened upon the “grisly tableau of Mendieta’s naked, bloodied torso tied to a table surrounded by signs of violent struggle” in a staging of the crime scene as it was reported in the press (Irish 2010, p. 36). The work is raw and literal, designed to shock the unprepared viewers who become implicated by unwittingly entering the space, discovering the body of Mendieta who presents herself as the murdered victim. Notably, Mendieta created a work in 1973 that involved mattresses entitled *Bloody Mattresses* or *Mattresses*.

¹³⁸ Smith 21 September 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html>], accessed 8 March 2021.

¹³⁹ Sulkowicz 15 May 2014 [<https://time.com/99780/campus-sexual-assault-emma-sulkowicz/>], accessed 1 July 2021.

evidence.¹⁴⁰ Sulkowicz then launched a failed appeal and was subsequently highly critical of the proceedings.¹⁴¹ It was an additional year after reporting the assault before Sulkowicz went public.¹⁴²

In April 2014, Sulkowicz was one of twenty-three Columbia and Barnard students to file a federal complaint (by November this number had risen to twenty-eight), alleging Title IX, as well as Title II and Clery Act, violations, due to the universities alleged mishandling of sexual assault and individual gender-based misconduct cases.¹⁴³ Then, in May 2014 Sulkowicz filed a complaint with the New York Police Department, but this did not progress further.

Nevertheless, she secretly recorded the police interview on her phone and then made a short video which showed her dismantling a bed with the police recording as the audio. Subsequently, she focussed solely on the mattress and the act of carrying it.

Sulkowicz, a visual arts major, announced the “endurance performance art piece” *Mattress Performance*, which was for her senior thesis, in a video for the *Columbia Daily Spectator* on

¹⁴⁰ It is important to note that the avenues for addressing sexual violence on campuses that I discuss in this section are largely specific to the US.

¹⁴¹ Sulkowicz 15 May 2014 [<https://time.com/99780/campus-sexual-assault-emma-sulkowicz/>], accessed 1 July 2021.

¹⁴² Pérez-Peña and Taylor 3 May 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/us/fight-against-sex-crimes-holds-colleges-to-account.html>], accessed 8 July 2021.

¹⁴³ Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits sex discrimination in educational institutions supported by the federal government. Title II of the 1976 Education Amendments requires recipients of federal funds to initiate systematic programmes to tackle gender discrimination and stereotyping in vocational educational programmes and the Clery Act (1990) requires universities and colleges who participate in federal financial aid programmes to keep and disclose information regarding crimes on or around the campus, including sexual assault. The 4 April 2011 US Department of Education directive (Dear Colleague Letter), which was in response to a wave of student activism, expanded the remit of Title IX and made preventing and responding to sexual violence central elements of universities’ duties under Title IX (Serisier 2018, p. 162).

2 September 2014.¹⁴⁴ This was at the same time that Obama and the White House Council on Women and Girls launched the It's On Us campaign to raise awareness of and tackle sexual assault on college campuses. Therefore, the issue was on the national political agenda. The central premise of the performance was that Sulkowicz was to carry a fifty-pound extra-long dark blue twin mattress, the same type as used in Columbia's student accommodation, everywhere on the university campus for as long as she attended the same university as her rapist, an end point that was beyond her control (fig. 10). As a result of Nungesser being cleared of all responsibility by the university and no further action being taken, Sulkowicz carried the mattress for the rest of her senior year, including at a graduation event in May 2015, assisted by four friends, despite being asked by Columbia officials not to carry the mattress on stage. Ultimately, Sulkowicz carried the mattress, a symbol of her trauma and violation, for nine months. The "Rules of Engagement", that set out the parameters for her performance, were painted in black lettering on the walls of a studio and performance space in Watson Hall (fig. 11). They stipulated that Sulkowicz had to carry the mattress everywhere she went on Columbia University property and that she was not permitted to seek help but could accept it if it was offered.

¹⁴⁴ *Columbia Daily Spectator* and Sulkowicz 2 September 2014 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9hHZbuYVnU>], accessed 19 February 2021. The video now has over two million views.



Fig. 10 Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, September 2014 – May 2015, performance. Columbia University, New York City.



Fig. 11 Emma Sulkowicz, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight): Rules of Engagement*, September 2015 – May 2015, performance and black paint on white walls. Watson Hall, Columbia University, New York City.

In early December 1977, in the weeks leading up to what ultimately became *In Mourning and In Rage*, Lacy and Labowitz met and lamented over the rape and murder of, then, ten women by the so-called Hillside Strangler across LA and the media coverage of it. Lacy and Labowitz felt that the coverage was sensationalised and salacious, serving to mythologise the figure of the killer by speculating on his personality and furthering an immense sense of fear in women, reinforcing their sense of helplessness.¹⁴⁵ The lives and appearances of each victim were scrutinised, questioning why these women had been singled out, reinforcing the myth that victims are responsible and women are able to protect themselves if they just know how and why particular women are targeted.¹⁴⁶ Lacy also highlights that structural analysis, contextualisation and the ways in which violence is nurtured by cultural conditions and how it can be tackled, was missing from the media coverage.¹⁴⁷ Moreover, Lacy argues that “in telling this story the news media perpetuated the same images and attitudes, ironically appealed to the same prurient interests, that created the social climate for the crime itself”.¹⁴⁸ In sharing their pain, rage, grief and feelings of powerlessness, Lacy and Labowitz decided to throw their energy into a performance, “a personal expression but one which would also fulfil two important goals: to create a public ritual for women in Los Angeles to express their grief, their rage and their demands for concrete action and to

¹⁴⁵ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 3.

¹⁴⁸ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 4.

present, within the media, a feminist perspective of the case".¹⁴⁹ In less than two weeks, they had organised *In Mourning and In Rage* (figs. 12-13).



Fig. 12 Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage*, 13 December 1977, performance. City Hall, Los Angeles.

¹⁴⁹ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 4.



Fig. 13 Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz, *In Mourning and In Rage*, 13 December 1977, performance. City Hall, Los Angeles.

On 13 December 1977 seventy women dressed in black congregated at the Woman's Building in LA and received instructions for the event. Ten actresses, representing the ten victims of the Hillside Strangler, emerged from the building and entered a hearse, which then departed with two motorcycle escorts, followed by a convoy of twenty-two cars filled with the seventy women. Each car had its lights on and displayed two stickers that read "funeral" and "stop violence against women". The motorcade circled City Hall twice and then stopped in front of gathered members of the media. Nine of the ten performers, who were dressed in black and veiled, adorning head pieces shaped like coffins making them seven-feet tall, emerged from the hearse one by one and stood in line on the pavement, followed by the final figure dressed in scarlet. The nine mourners echo the figure of death in Maya Deren's 1943 film *Meshes of the Afternoon*. Although recognising this reference is not

necessary to understanding the work, it indicates “one way in which Lacy and Labowitz layered avant-garde ideas into their popularly accessible work”, as demonstrated by Irish.¹⁵⁰

The ten women then faced the street as the hearse departed and the women from the motorcade drove past slowly in a silent homage to the mourners.¹⁵¹ Then “forming a procession three abreast, the mourners walked toward the steps in front of City Hall”, with women from the motorcade gathered on either side of the steps “forming a black-clothed chorus from a modern tragedy” and a banner was unfurled that read “In Memory of Our Sisters Women Fight Back”.¹⁵² Once the media had positioned itself, one by one the performers came forward to the microphone to read a statement, which was followed by the chorus echoing “in memory of our sisters, we fight back”, “modelled on classical tragedy”.¹⁵³ Then the performer was draped in red, a colour associated with rage, by the woman dressed in scarlet, before returning to her place on the steps. The first performer said “I am here for the ten women who have been raped and strangled between October 18 and November 29” and then “each of the nine women made her statement which connected this seemingly random incident of violence in Los Angeles with the greater picture of nationwide violence toward women”, as explained by Labowitz and Lacy, an analysis that was lacking in the media coverage they were critiquing.¹⁵⁴ They further this by highlighting that each woman in black represented a specific aspect of violence towards women and they

¹⁵⁰ Irish 2010, pp. 71-72.

¹⁵¹ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 52.

¹⁵² Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 52.

¹⁵³ Princenthal 2019, p. 121.

¹⁵⁴ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 52.

spoke in memory of the women who had suffered from it.¹⁵⁵ Finally, the woman in scarlet came forward and said “I am here for the rage of all women. I am here for women fighting back!” This functions as a summoning or mobilising of community and solidarity, a precedent of social media approaches that would follow in later decades, such as #MeToo and #YesAllWomen.

Lacy then came forward to make a statement directed towards the press, which explained the rationale for the work that would be sought after by the media. Lacy reiterated the connection between the murders and other forms of violence against women, including that which is unreported and fictionalised, showing that the murders were not isolated, random or unexplainable incidents.¹⁵⁶ Lacy stated that they were there for the victims of the Hillside Strangler and for all women and in memory of women who had been assaulted and killed “a result of the pervasive and ongoing attitude of violence toward women”.¹⁵⁷ By obscuring the face and identity of the performers, Lacy is seemingly further counteracting the media scrutiny of victim’s lives and appearances, shifting the focus onto the broader issue of violence against women, indicating that it could be any woman who becomes a victim. Finally, she explained that they were there to collectively and publicly share grief, rage and concern, which previously was only expressed as fear by individual women, recognising their collective strength through action, exhorting “we are fighting back”.¹⁵⁸ A member of the Los

¹⁵⁵ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

¹⁵⁶ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 1.

¹⁵⁷ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

¹⁵⁸ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women then read a prepared list of three demands which was presented to three members of the city council and Deputy Mayor who voiced their support. Finally, Holly Near sang *Fight Back!* acapella which she wrote for the event and the audience joined in, creating a spontaneous dance circle with chants of “women fight back”, before artists and political organisers met with and answered questions from the press.

Similar to *Three Weeks*, *In Mourning and In Rage* utilised the collaboration of artists and non-artists in the organising and performing of the event. The artists also sought to establish civic partnerships to gain endorsement from city government, which was aided by their staging of the event at City Hall. Labowitz and Lacy began the construction of the piece by calling a meeting with women from various women’s organisations, where they outlined their ideas for the performance and offered the event as a framework for the publicisation of the groups’ work tackling violence against women.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, the artists aimed to provide a template for the involvement of women’s organisations and government representatives who wanted to share in a collective statement against violence, establishing a more united front.¹⁶⁰ Bia Lowe and members of the Woman’s Building were also involved in creation of the work and a network of media representatives who would cover the event was created. Lacy highlights that the performance, its coverage and word of mouth accounts

¹⁵⁹ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

¹⁶⁰ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

considerably enhanced future interaction between artists and feminist activists in LA, which previously did not occur.¹⁶¹

In contrast to this, Sulkowicz did not collaborate with the media, organisations or institutions. Her resistance to collaborating with the latter is perhaps reflective of her negative experiences when attempting to redress her grievances within such systems. Yet she gained the support of her college supervisors, which enabled the performance to take place. Furthermore, unlike *In Mourning and In Rage*, which uses collective women's speech to address violence against women, Sulkowicz is the victim of sexual violence, speaking out about her own experience, creating a more individualised performance. This is perhaps reflective of the fourth wave imperative, which is visible on social media, that only permits individuals to talk about that which they have personally experienced, to avoid the risk of speaking over or for others, assertions which I complicate further on. Indeed, Lewis argues that in this era of individualism "women are often frightened to claim the authority to speak about any lives except their own".¹⁶² This contrasts the second wave's supposed drive to address the universality of particular experiences. This also draws into question whether the fourth wave's supposed individualism is incompatible with more collective and collaborative strategies that are often associated with the second wave.

¹⁶¹ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021. p. 5.

¹⁶² Lewis 2020, p. 8.

The act of carrying the mattress represents Sulkowicz carrying the weight of her trauma, a burden that she is able to carry herself but continually struggles with. The stipulation that Sulkowicz is unable to seek help but can accept it if it is offered, raises some points of consideration in relation to the notions of collaboration and collectivism. It presents an opportunity for spontaneous participation, in which friends or strangers can enter the “the space of performance”, as Sulkowicz terms it and become a performer, helping to carry the mattress and partially alleviating the weight of her trauma.¹⁶³ Therefore, the work fluctuates between the “solitary and participatory”, as described by Smith.¹⁶⁴ Yet, it heightens a sense of isolation, as Sulkowicz is unable to reach out for help and instigate connections and must bear the weight until someone offers support, perhaps referencing the experience of sexual assault survivors. However, as the piece went on Sulkowicz became better at carrying the weight and more people offered to help. Notably, as demonstrated by Shayoni Mitra, Carry That Weight Together, a student group established in response to Sulkowicz’s performance, galvanised around this idea of collective carrying, moving the work away from the action or burden of the victim to sharing the weight, defining the act of collective carrying as an idealist, metaphorical gesture, enacting a call to collective action.¹⁶⁵ This shows how the individualism and isolation of *Mattress Performance* is more complex than it first appears. It also exemplifies the tension that Serisier identifies between individual empowerment and collective politics within speaking out.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, despite the participatory element and

¹⁶³ Smith 21 September 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html>], accessed 8 March 2021.

¹⁶⁴ Smith 21 September 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html>], accessed 8 March 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Mitra 2015, p. 389.

¹⁶⁶ Serisier 2018, p. 52.

Sulkowicz's utilisation of the media, *Mattress Performance*, like Chalk Back, lacks long term coalition-building with organisations and institutions that can aid in instigating and sustaining structural change.

The pragmatic demands that were issued to members of the city council during *In Mourning and In Rage* were: mandatory self-defence in grammar schools, telephone emergency listing of rape hotline numbers and funding for neighbourhood protection programmes.¹⁶⁷ The outcomes included \$100,000 reward money that was being offered by the county for information on the murderer was converted into funding for free self-defence classes throughout the city, an initiative that had begun to take shape before the event, but received a significant boost as a result of the event's publicity.¹⁶⁸ Similarly, two self-defence workshops were organised for city employees, offered by councilwoman Joy Picus and a Saturday workshop open to the public was sponsored by rape hotlines.¹⁶⁹ Nevertheless, this emphasis on self-defence places the burden of responsibility to protect oneself onto women, reinforcing what the artists were critiquing the media coverage for. Furthermore, following the event, one reporter confronted a telephone company representative and shortly after the company listed rape hotlines in the front of the phone book, something had been requested by feminist activists for over a year, although they were removed the subsequent year.¹⁷⁰ Yet such outcomes were achieved by devising pragmatic demands and establishing

¹⁶⁷ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 55.

¹⁶⁸ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 5.

¹⁷⁰ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 5.

connections beyond the feminist sphere to implement plans. Indeed, Lacy argues that “our victory may ultimately be most important in demonstrating a strategy for artists’ contribution to public critique and social change”.¹⁷¹ Also, by using a municipal building as the stage for the performance, there was an association made between official approbation and a challenge to the media, thus “the artists created a physical link, both live and in the media, between the resistance to violence and public policy”, as highlighted by Irish.¹⁷²

Sulkowicz focussed on the punishment of Nungesser through existing punitive systems rather than structural changes, which contrasts the pragmatic demands and structural analysis within *In Mourning and In Rage*. Therefore, Sulkowicz is somewhat shoring up the institutional and hierarchical power structures that sustain violence and oppression. As previously mentioned, this also occurred during #MeToo and the “Weinstein Effect”, which similarly focussed on the exposure and punishment of individual “bad” men, rather than addressing systemic issues.¹⁷³ Similar to #MeToo, perhaps the hyper-focus on the individual involved, rather than the broader issues of rape culture on college campuses, is in part due to the intense media coverage the case gained, even before the work came to fruition.

Despite this, there are a number of changes that came as a result of the criticisms charged at Columbia. Since the proceedings involving Sulkowicz, Columbia has instituted several

¹⁷¹ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 5.

¹⁷² Irish 2010, p. 73.

¹⁷³ For an early example of the term “Harvey Weinstein effect” see Guynn and Della Cava 25 October 2017 [<https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2017/10/25/harvey-weinstein-effect-men-losing-their-jobs-and-reputations-over-sexual-misconduct-charges-bu/796007001/>], accessed 14 June 2021.

improvements to their sexual assault and harassment procedures to ensure victims' stories are recorded accurately and that they receive the support that they need.¹⁷⁴ The university also planned on bringing in initiatives and additional consent education for students aimed at prevention.¹⁷⁵ These changes came about even though Sulkowicz was only lobbying for the expulsion of Nungesser, which did not happen, rather than procedural reform.

However, there is evidence to suggest that little has changed in terms of the avenues that victims can access to redress their grievances. *Alexander v. Yale* in 1980 was the first use of Title IX in charges of sexual harassment against an educational institution and helped to establish that sexual harassment and a lack of grievance procedure to handle such complaints, constituted sex discrimination and was therefore violating Title IX. As a result, the case set a significant precedent and Yale, alongside most other US universities, instituted grievance procedures for sexual harassment. Over thirty years later students continue to file federal complaints alleging violations of Title IX, demonstrating the limitations of university grievance procedures in handling cases of sexual violence. Significantly, Title IX is specific to the US and students in other countries lack this avenue of action. Furthermore, it has had limited impact. Linda Blum and Ethel Mickey argue that “sexual harassment and sexual

¹⁷⁴ Pérez-Peña and Taylor 3 May 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/us/fight-against-sex-crimes-holds-colleges-to-account.html>], accessed 8 July 2021; Bazelon 29 May 2015 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>], accessed 8 July 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Pérez-Peña and Taylor 3 May 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/us/fight-against-sex-crimes-holds-colleges-to-account.html>], accessed 8 July 2021; Bazelon 29 May 2015 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>], accessed 8 July 2021.

assault on campuses sustain an environment hostile to women and illustrate the persisting weakness in enforcement of Title IX".¹⁷⁶

More broadly, there has been a resurgence of campus activism against sexual violence in both the US and UK, due to numerous high-profile cases. For example, the resignation of Professor Sara Ahmed from Goldsmith's University in 2016 following their alleged failure to address harassment at the university. Notably, Sulkowicz's process of speaking out coexisted alongside other activism against sexual assault at Columbia. For example, No Red Tape was founded in Spring 2013 in response to an increasing awareness of the experiences of sexual assault survivors at the university.¹⁷⁷ The group use visual gestures of placing red tape in public places on campus to resist the "bureaucratic red tape that silences survivors' voices".¹⁷⁸ For example, in March 2014 students with red tape over their mouths handed out letters to prospective students advising them about Columbia's sexual assault policy, but they were promptly removed.¹⁷⁹

Sulkowicz speaking out also sparked significant activism and conversations online and across campus. Indeed, Mitra contends that Sulkowicz's original artistic framework transformed into a blueprint for "a more publicised movement against sexual assaults on Columbia's campus and more widely across several American universities, many in solidarity with or

¹⁷⁶ Blum and Mickey 2019, p. 246.

¹⁷⁷ Mitra claims that No Red Tape have been acting as a de facto group at Columbia since at least 1999, however this is not stated on their website (Mitra 2015, p. 389).

¹⁷⁸ No Red Tape [<http://noredtapecu.org/a-history>], accessed 31 August 2021.

¹⁷⁹ No Red Tape [<http://noredtapecu.org/a-history>], accessed 31 August 2021.

drawing direct inspiration from” the piece.¹⁸⁰ In particular, there was an extension of *Mattress Performance* that took the form of the (First) National Day of Action (29 October 2014), less than two months after Sulkowicz announced her work, which more closely modelled *In Mourning and In Rage*, although this connection is not mentioned. This moved the work and its trajectory beyond the individual to the collective. It was organised by student activist groups like Carry That Weight Together and No Red Tape and broader women’s rights groups like Hollaback!¹⁸¹ Participants from over 130 schools across five countries staged collective carryings of mattresses.¹⁸² This shows how collectivity became woven into the fabric and legacy of Sulkowicz’s performance, despite it initially appearing individualist, further highlighting the complexities of the relationship between the two in the context of the fourth wave.

The first few speakers at Columbia’s National Day of Action, some of which were from university activist groups and initiatives, described their personal experiences of assault on campus and the university’s mishandling of the cases, explaining that they were galvanised to speak after witnessing others coming forward.¹⁸³ The next group of speakers were

¹⁸⁰ Mitra 2015, p. 387.

¹⁸¹ Notably, the day before the day of action, Hollaback! released the video ‘10 Hours of Walking in NYC as a Woman’, which documented the relentless street harassment a woman faced whilst walking through the city and subsequently went viral (Bliss and Hollaback! 28 October 2014 [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b1XGPvbWn0A>], accessed 7 February 2022). However, the video faced allegations that white harassers were edited out and that they only walked through predominantly minority or immigrant areas, echoing some of the concerns people had surrounding the maps in *Three Weeks* (Chow 1 November 2014 [<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2014/11/01/360422087/hollaback-video-calls-out-catcallers-but-cuts-out-white-men>], accessed 22 October 2022). This shows how such conversations are longstanding and remain prevalent within feminist discourse and highlights the ways in which feminists are still struggling to grapple with such issues.

¹⁸² Mitra 2015, p. 387.

¹⁸³ Mitra 2015, p. 395.

community partners who drew connections between sexual violence on campuses and broader conditions of violence against women, shifting the culpability and responsibility for sexual assault outwards.¹⁸⁴ This echoes Serisier's argument that, in an extension of the tenets of speaking out, "survivor speech not only empowers individual survivors but enables others to speak and undermines rape myths and victim-blaming in the wider community".¹⁸⁵ Finally, Sulkowicz came forward and gave a call to action, showing the need for collective involvement.¹⁸⁶ In many ways this framework of connecting individual cases of violence to broader conditions before giving a galvanising call to action follows the script of *In Mourning and In Rage* (even the location of the steps of Columbia's historic Low's Library provides a familiar staging). There is an accumulative weight building with each speech or statement, ending with a galvanising crescendo. Notably, Columbia senior Darializa Avila-Chevalier addressed the lack of voices of women of colour in Carry That Weight Together, which recalled her own article on the issue 'Sister Outsider: Examining the Intersection between race and sexual assault at Columbia' in the *Columbia Spectator*.¹⁸⁷ As such, the groups involved in the day of action considered how to expand Sulkowicz's performance from the context of personal experience and individual artistic expression to forge wider and more intersectional discussions around all forms of violence against women.¹⁸⁸ This echoes Lacy and Labowitz connecting the Hillside Strangler murders and its sensationalised media coverage to broader conditions of gendered violence.

¹⁸⁴ Mitra 2015, pp. 395-96.

¹⁸⁵ Serisier 2018, p. 36.

¹⁸⁶ Mitra 2015, p. 395.

¹⁸⁷ Mitra 2015, p. 395.

¹⁸⁸ Mitra 2015, p. 395.

After the speeches, a procession of twenty-eight mattresses, representing the twenty-eight complainants in the Title IX complaint, went to university president's Lee Bollinger's house, where the mattresses were left with one listing demands for changes in how the university handles cases of gendered misconduct and sexual assault, echoing the demands made at the end of *In Mourning and In Rage*. Other mattresses were signed by hundreds of members of the Columbia community who pledged to support survivors and called on Bollinger to do the same.¹⁸⁹ However, within an hour the mattresses were discarded and No Red Tape was fined for the clean-up costs.¹⁹⁰ Although the day of action merged visual elements with collective activism, like *In Mourning and In Rage*, and facilitated collaboration between student and feminist organisations and community figures, there was a lack of long term coalition-building that would ensure their demands were put into action.

There is a ritualistic element in both *In Mourning and In Rage* and *Mattress Performance*. Sulkowicz's work becomes a daily ritual and burden, similar to Vito Acconci's *Room Piece* (1970) in which over a series of weekends he moved his belongings from his apartment to a gallery, where he had to go to collect them and return them once he had used the item.¹⁹¹ Labowitz and Lacy highlight that the purpose of *In Mourning and In Rage* was to provide a public space for women to come together to publicly share their rage and grief in the form of

¹⁸⁹ No Red Tape [<http://noredtapecu.org/a-history>], accessed 31 August 2021.

¹⁹⁰ No Red Tape [<http://noredtapecu.org/a-history>], accessed 31 August 2021.

¹⁹¹ Although *Mattress Performance* was part of Sulkowicz's senior thesis, so must have had artistic influences and references, these are not mentioned in the media coverage of the piece.

ritual to transform isolation into a statement of solidarity and action.¹⁹² This merging of rage and grief is evident in the statements that the performers read out, which emphasised that they were there for the memory of women who suffered at the hands of male violence and it is in that memory that they “fight back”. This is furthered by Lacy and Labowitz who maintain that the participants did not simply grieve but attacked the sensationalised media coverage of the murders which contributes to the conditions and culture of violence against women.¹⁹³ The nine seven-foot tall women transformed “trivialised images of mourners as old, powerless women” into commanding figures, “angrily demanding an end to violence against women” and symbols of the power of women “who have historically banded together as mourners and givers of life and death in their culture”.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, the image of mourning is not one of weakness but rather of women united in pain and rage, the latter of which “provides the courage and the energy to demand social change”, as suggested by Labowitz and Lacy.¹⁹⁵

Evidently, like other fourth wave artworks I discuss in later chapters, such as Bell’s *I Didn’t Ask For This* and Rupī Kaur’s *period. 1, Mattress Performance* blurs the public and private, reflecting how the two merge in the act of speaking out. Indeed, the work is a refusal to “keep her violation private, [publicly] carrying with her a stark reminder of where it took place”, as argued by Smith.¹⁹⁶ Sulkowicz conveys that beds are kept in intimate, private

¹⁹² Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 5.

¹⁹³ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 405.

¹⁹⁴ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 407; Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

¹⁹⁵ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

¹⁹⁶ Smith 21 September 2014 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html>], accessed 8 March 2021.

spaces, where one can retreat and escape, yet this space for her became fraught after her assault.¹⁹⁷ She explains that the last year of her life was marked by telling people what happened in that private space and bringing it into the light, thus the act of carrying a mattress in public reflects how Sulkowicz spoke out about her experiences publicly.¹⁹⁸ Also, the mattress materialises the weight placed on a victim when they publicly speak out. Moreover, the background to *Mattress Performance* indicates multiple moments of Sulkowicz speaking out, of which the performance is a culmination, indicating a persistent resistance to silence and how survivors are often required to repeatedly tell their experiences of sexual violence in the public realm.

As a result of a number of high-profile instances of sexual assault and harassment on university campuses in the US and UK over recent years and subsequent feminist campaigns, attention has (re)turned to institutionalised sexism within higher education. Princenthal asserts that Sulkowicz's performance was "undertaken to draw attention".¹⁹⁹ However, the media storm surrounding Sulkowicz had begun before her performance had even come to fruition, including writing an article for *Time* and being featured in *The New York Times*.²⁰⁰ Therefore, the positive and negative attention *Mattress Performance* received was inevitable, even though it was not specifically designed for media coverage, unlike *In*

¹⁹⁷ *Columbia Daily Spectator* and Sulkowicz 2 September 2014 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9hHZbuYVnU], accessed 19 February 2021.

¹⁹⁸ *Columbia Daily Spectator* and Sulkowicz 2 September 2014 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9hHZbuYVnU], accessed 19 February 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Princenthal 2019, p. 243.

²⁰⁰ Sulkowicz 15 May 2014 [https://time.com/99780/campus-sexual-assault-emma-sulkowicz/], accessed 1 July 2021; Pérez-Peña and Taylor 3 May 2014 [https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/04/us/fight-against-sex-crimes-holds-colleges-to-account.html], accessed 8 July 2021.

Mourning and In Rage. Yet the attention Sulkowicz received included being featured in a 2019 Louis Theroux's BBC documentary *The Night in Question* and Sulkowicz being awarded the 2016 Woman of Courage Award by the National Organisation for Women for raising awareness of rape culture on US campuses. As a result, Sulkowicz became a public figure due to her speaking out and was granted a degree of authority.

Emily Bazelon argues that the case is unusual in the "exhausting intensity of media circus that has attended it".²⁰¹ Yet, as demonstrated by Princenthal, "Sulkowicz was both deplored and lionised".²⁰² Indeed, the day after graduation posters with a picture of Sulkowicz and the mattress appeared in the neighbourhood and were circulated online with the words "Pretty Little Liar" and "#RAPEHOAX" (note the use of a hashtag in an offline context, perhaps as a way to mobilise online trolling) and the abuse has continued online. Even the extent of the coverage was criticised, for example Naomi Schaefer Riley denounced the positive attention Sulkowicz received and that she was Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's guest at the State of the Union Address in 2015.²⁰³ Princenthal highlights that:

The enormous response Sulkowicz generates, particularly with *Carry that Weight*, suggests that attention paid to victims of sexual violence, particularly within the art world, is disproportionately on privileged, young and attractive women who have the wherewithal to state their cases.²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Bazelon 29 May 2015 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>], accessed 8 July 2021.

²⁰² Princenthal 2019, p. 243.

²⁰³ Schaefer Riley 8 February 2015 [<https://nypost.com/2015/02/08/columbia-mattress-rape-case-is-not-justice-its-shaming-without-proof/>], accessed 1 July 2021. Sulkowicz has appeared with Senator Gillibrand on numerous occasions to address the issue of sexual assault on campuses.

²⁰⁴ Princenthal 2019, p. 243.

However, in relation to speaking out, Sulkowicz is privileged in some ways, being middle-class, non-disabled, university educated and conventionally attractive, but is not privileged in other ways, being of Chinese, Japanese and Jewish descent and how her assault did not constitute “real” or stranger rape and as a result was widely disbelieved.²⁰⁵ Consequently, Sulkowicz was granted a platform to share her experiences but she simultaneously suffered scrutinisation, abuse and backlash. As noted by Serisier, the stories that are and have historically been rendered most tellable and thus most able to be heard and acknowledged, both within genre of speaking out and in the legal domain and media, are predominantly those of “real” or violent stranger rape told by educated white women, “which is most assimilable to criminal justice and other normative discourses.”²⁰⁶ Consequently, these women have had the most sympathetic treatment and have greater access to cultural authority, whereas casting stories outside of this genre of “legitimate” rape narratives results in the women who tell them being constructed as liars and undeserving of sympathy, as was evident in the treatment of Sulkowicz.²⁰⁷

Whilst Sulkowicz became somewhat a victim of the media storm, Lacy and Labowitz purposefully solicited press attention to critique them, intervening in the transmission of harmful and sensationalist messages. Indeed, Lacy and Labowitz contend that “*In Mourning and In Rage* was perhaps our most compelling example of a one-time media performance,

²⁰⁵ “Real” or stranger rape can be defined as a violent act of sexual violence committed by a male perpetrator who is unknown to the “innocent” female victim.

²⁰⁶ Serisier 2018, pp. 16, 48 and 50.

²⁰⁷ Serisier 2018, pp. 41-42 and 151.

staged as a guerrilla intervention to the conventions of sex crime reportage”.²⁰⁸ Media events or performances are one-time, designed specifically for news coverage and choreographed to control the content that is distributed through the media, providing a way to raise awareness of an issue for a mass audience.²⁰⁹ Lacy and Labowitz identify three ultimate purposes of media work:

first, to interrupt the incessant flow of images that supports the established social order with alternative ways of thinking and acting; second, to organise and activate viewers (media is not the only, nor necessarily most effective way to do this); third, to create artful and original imagery that follows in the tradition of fine art to help viewers see the world in a new way and learn something about themselves in relation to it.²¹⁰

Therefore, *In Mourning and In Rage* provided a framework for future media events. Similar to the inevitability of the media attention that *Mattress Performance* gained, Lacy and Labowitz highlight that “the media’s dramatization of the Hillside Strangler murders ensured coverage of our memorial performance by major local newscasters at the time”.²¹¹ The location of City Hall also made it more likely for the media to cover the event.²¹² As a result, *In Mourning and In Rage* received extensive coverage in local and state-wide news and received some national attention.

In Mourning and In Rage epitomises the use of powerful imagery in Lacy’s work and the significance of aesthetic decisions because of her use of the visual to connect and communicate with mass audiences. Indeed, Lacy explains that “we would use the media’s

²⁰⁸ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 405.

²⁰⁹ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 404.

²¹⁰ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 410.

²¹¹ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 407.

²¹² Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 408

own language of high drama and intriguing visuals to create a newsworthy event as a performance. Our design would fit the form of a news broadcast”.²¹³ Before the motorcade arrived, one of the collaborating artists was at City Hall preparing the press and throughout the event the media were directed to obtain footage that would represent the work’s intentions.²¹⁴ Also, the bold colours, costuming, repetition, sound bites and funeral procession all appealed to and anticipated media conventions. Moreover, “the banner was designed to fit in the horizontal frame of a camera, so that one image – of the women gathered on City Hall’s steps, with the banner raised – could carry a clear meaning via mass media” (fig. 12).²¹⁵ This control over a clear single image that was captured by the media allowed Lacy and Labowitz to easily communicate their aims to a mass audience. Lacy and Labowitz were aware of the need to present information in the most coherent and clear way as subtleties would not be recorded or respected (as they are on social media), arguing “the *art* is in making it compelling; the *politics* is in making it clear”, which also reflects Lacy’s intentions with the maps in *Three Weeks*.²¹⁶

Lacy and Labowitz explain that a “a successful media event is one part of an overall strategy to influence public opinion, but it needs to be followed up with the in-depth information people will need to make knowledgeable choices”, which public informational campaigns are able to do.²¹⁷ Lacy and Labowitz were able to do this with *In Mourning and In Rage* through

²¹³ Lacy 1978 [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59d735cff9a61e180f59e912/t/5acd86a91ae6cf6889bef25d/1523418793660/ARIADNE_IMAIR-AA.pdf], accessed 23 July 2021, p. 4.

²¹⁴ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 55.

²¹⁵ Irish 2010, p. 71.

²¹⁶ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], p. 404.

²¹⁷ Lacy and Labowitz 2010 [1985], pp. 404-05.

follow-up media activities. Talk show appearances and meetings with reporters that came about because of the work's coverage allowed for an extension of discussions surrounding the issues raised in the work, particularly the sensationalised coverage of the murders and alternatives to it. Discussions with city politicians, which were also devised for media coverage, "repeated and consolidated the performance's themes, aligning government rhetoric with the artists' agenda", as highlighted by Princenthal.²¹⁸ The follow-up activities and appearances helped to broaden and extend the temporality of conversations to include that which could not be addressed in the performance or initial news coverage.

Consequently, as suggested by Irish, *In Mourning and in Rage* "leveraged an increased willingness to focus on rape in broadcast and print media, at the same time the artists sought to reorient that coverage toward what they considered to be a woman-identified perspective".²¹⁹ In contrast to this, the media coverage of Sulkowicz's performance did not necessarily broaden the conversations surrounding sexual violence on college campuses, focussing instead on the details of the specific case, obscuring the need for wider discussions.

Significantly, Lacy and Labowitz do not note a backlash occurring in response to *In Mourning and In Rage* and their writings focus on the positive outcomes of the performance. This is in stark contrast to *Mattress Performance*, in which the media coverage focused heavily on the backlash to and criticisms of the work and the response of the accused and his family. This is not to say that a backlash did not occur in response to *In Mourning and In Rage*, as it

²¹⁸ Princenthal 2019, p. 121.

²¹⁹ Irish 2010, p. 72.

happened for *Three Weeks*. But it perhaps further demonstrates that the digital sphere is a space in which such backlashes can take place and be amplified. Furthermore, the response to *Mattress Performance* highlights that such backlashes are not limited to anti-feminism but can occur within feminism itself and exemplifies some of the risks and vulnerabilities of publicly speaking out.

Longstanding divisions within feminisms surrounding the issue of sexual violence, particularly on university campuses, are typically framed as a generational issue. Indeed, Princenthal claims that there is a generational divide between younger and older women on questions of responsibility.²²⁰ This is particularly evident in an interview with Susan Brownmiller, the author of the seminal 1975 book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*, which plays on these supposed generational divides, in which she suggests that women need to be realistic of the dangers of sexual assault and should take special precautions.²²¹ She also expresses that her “feeling about young women trapped in sex situations that they don’t want is: ‘Didn’t you see the warning signs? Who do you expect to do your fighting for you?’ It is a little late, after you are both undressed, to say ‘I don’t want this’”.²²² Similarly, it is often raised that Sulkowicz had previous sexual relations with Nungesser and expressed wanting to see him after the alleged assault to discredit her allegations. Meanwhile, Sulkowicz is positioned as a representative of contemporary feminism and all that is

²²⁰ Princenthal 2019, p. 255.

²²¹ Van Syckle 17 September 2015 [<https://www.thecut.com/2015/09/what-todays-rape-activists-dont-get.html>], accessed 26 August 2021.

²²² Van Syckle 17 September 2015 [<https://www.thecut.com/2015/09/what-todays-rape-activists-dont-get.html>], accessed 26 August 2021.

supposedly wrong with it, as I discuss in more detail below. However, such questions surrounding responsibility are longstanding established debates and divisions within feminism and whilst discussions surrounding victim-blaming have increased over recent years with events like SlutWalk, these conflicts cannot be simply drawn across generational lines. *In Mourning and In Rage* resists the focus in the media on how women are somehow responsible for what happens to them and how they can supposedly take measures to protect themselves, by connecting the murders to the continuum of gendered violence women experience. Therefore, Lacy and Labowitz were actively critiquing the perception that women are somehow responsible for the violence that they endure. The longstanding and well-established nature of these debates, when reductively framed as generational, are obscured and not sufficiently engaged with, furthering generational divides and undermining the possibility of intergenerational connection and dialogue.

Criticisms of Sulkowicz and her performance can also fall into a postfeminist realm of highlighting the apparent problems with (a certain type of) feminism/feminists, which again is often framed as a generational divide as a way to devalue and trivialise student activism. This is epitomised in one of the most heavily quoted criticisms of Sulkowicz work by Camille Paglia, who argues:

I call it 'mattress feminism.' Perpetually lugging around your bad memories – never evolving or moving on! It's like a parody of the worst aspects of that kind of grievance-oriented feminism. [...] Columbia [...] enabled this protracted masochistic exercise where a young woman trapped herself in her own bad memories and publicly labelled herself as

a victim, which will now be her identity forever. This isn't feminism – which should empower women, not cripple them.²²³

In her critique, Paglia shifts the mattress from being a symbol of the weight of trauma and the act of speaking out to a symbol of resentment, grievances, victimhood, bad sexual experiences and being trapped in the past.

In lamenting the current state of contemporary feminism and campus activism more broadly, Paglia positions her feminism in opposition to this, whilst employing a rhetoric that casts Sulkowicz's activism as part of the so-called "snowflake" generation, as demonstrated by Rivers.²²⁴ This is part of a postfeminist rhetoric which operates on perceiving women who name or call attention to the problem, to be creating a problem or are the problem themselves.²²⁵ A problem that within postfeminist sentiments was supposedly exposed and solved a generation ago, corresponding with the notion that there is a generation, the "snowflakes" and students, who purposefully seek offence when there is none.²²⁶ This kind of rhetoric serves to trivialise and undermine the activism and concerns of feminist activists, like Sulkowicz, who are seeking to tackle the continued pervasiveness of sexual assault on university campuses. Paglia casts Sulkowicz's "mattress feminism" or "grievance-oriented feminism" as the antithesis to her version of feminism, which is about empowerment and strength, suggesting that this form of speaking out does not result in empowerment, which

²²³ Daley 28 July 2015
[https://www.salon.com/2015/07/28/camille_paglia_how_bill_clinton_is_like_bill_cosby/], accessed 1 July 2021.

²²⁴ Rivers 2017, p. 144.

²²⁵ Rivers 2017, p. 144.

²²⁶ Rivers 2017, p. 144.

contrasts the promises it offers. This also neglects both the physical strength needed to carry the mattress and emotional strength required to publicly speak out. Evidently, Paglia positions this issue of women's supposed self-victimisation as generational, something that feminists of the so-called "snowflake" generation inflict upon themselves, as a way to undermine contemporary feminist activism against sexual violence. But this is not limited to Paglia and even extends into academic discourse, for example Princenthal claims that whilst it cannot be denied that impunity remains, "many young women see to expect victimisation will be part of their maturation process", which implies a sense of inevitability and passivity.²²⁷

However, the issue of (white) women's victimhood has long been explored within feminism. For example, in 1975 Brownmiller asserted "women are trained to be rape victims", before examining how women and girls are conditioned or "indoctrinated" into a "victim mentality".²²⁸ On one hand, Lacy and Labowitz demonstrate the connectedness of violence against women. They contend that "any of us could have been the woman who was killed, the victim of impersonal violence directed toward all members of the female sex".²²⁹ On the other hand, *In Mourning and In Rage* sought to challenge women's victimisation by critiquing the media's casting of women as victims. Labowitz and Lacy demonstrate that the images of victimisation used to describe such acts of violence reinforce feelings of isolation, fear and helplessness and cultivate and reproduce the image of "woman as victim",

²²⁷ Princenthal 2019, p. 253.

²²⁸ Brownmiller 1975, p. 309.

²²⁹ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

identifying a connection to images in advertising, news and entertainment media which portray women as victims or potential victims.²³⁰ Therefore, “the chorus provided participants with a structure for the active denial of collective victimisation”, thereby resisting its reinforcement in the media.²³¹ Lacy and Labowitz wanted to present an image, not of weakness and victimisation, but of collective strength. Indeed, they explain that “the ten women on the steps, the chorus and their banner, served as a background of unified woman-strength against which the remainder of the piece unfolded”.²³² Evidently, this contrasts how Paglia perceives *Mattress Performance*, which is as a symbol of self-victimisation and “grievance-oriented” feminism, the antithesis of strength, despite physical and emotional strength and collective support being a fundamental part of the work.

4.5 Conclusion

Overall, whilst fourth wave feminist activism against sexual violence is to some extent individualist, fragmented and overly reliant on social media and the notion of speaking out, it is also much more complex than this, as my comparative analyses have demonstrated. Princenthal maintains that in the decades since the 1970s work addressing sexual violence has become more specific, nuanced, articulate and particular, rather than expressing generalised experiences of threat.²³³ Princenthal goes onto argue that:

There are losses and gains in this progression. Competing grievances vie for attention. On one hand, righteousness threatens; feminism continues to fracture. On the other, perspectives have grown more acute and a multiplicity of voices has

²³⁰ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

²³¹ Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, p. 54.

²³² Labowitz-Starus and Lacy 1978, pp. 52-53.

²³³ Princenthal 2019, p 243.

arisen, offering a wealth of emotional and practical information – and abating the loneliness that was one among the most painful aspects of surviving rape.²³⁴

However, this promotes a linear and oppositional framing of feminist temporalities, positioning them as distinct and different from each other, which can shore up generational divides. In some ways, *Mattress Performance* exemplifies this specificity that Princenthal identifies. Nevertheless, broader activisms surrounding the work, such as Carry That Weight Together and the National Day of Action, extend the performance beyond the individual in an attempt to tackle rape culture on college campuses, whereas Chalk Back merges the specific and the general by connecting individual accounts to create a collective story that demonstrates the shared experience of street harassment. Furthermore, Chalk Back reveals feminist networks through its global decentralised movement and use of digital connectivity, particularly hashtag activism, which challenges the perspective that the fourth wave is individualist and fragmented. Yet it supports the notion that contemporary feminism consists of a multiplicity of voices, offering emotional support that remedies the loneliness survivors often experience. Overall, my analyses of these case studies have highlighted the complexities of the fourth wave, challenging the binaries that are often attributed to the second and fourth waves, such as the former being collective and the latter being individualist.

Falsely casting longstanding divisions and debates within feminism, such as discussions surrounding responsibility and victimisation, along generational lines reinforces intergenerational conflict. As evidenced by the feminist criticisms of Sulkowicz, pursuing and

²³⁴ Princenthal 2019, p. 243.

cementing generational divides can undermine the possibility of intergenerational collaboration and collectivism. However, in her contemporary reworkings of *Three Weeks*, Lacy facilitates and offers a model for cross-generational dialogues. By working across feminist waves, Lacy shows the complexity of intergenerational relationships as well as the overlaps and intersections of feminist waves. Therefore, acknowledging and exploring the entanglement of feminist waves and the ways in which the fourth wave is continuing the work of their predecessors offers the possibility for productive dialogues and collective praxis.

Moreover, the unsustainability of contemporary feminist activism has been emphasised. But the factors which result in the precarity and vulnerability of feminist activism against sexual violence are longstanding, although perhaps somewhat heightened by social media as the accumulation of emotionally-taxing stories and gendered abuse is inescapable.

Consequently, collective action, especially collaboration between online, on-the-ground and institutional feminisms and establishing coalitions beyond the feminist echo chamber, are required to go beyond connectivity and ensure the sustainability of feminist activism against sexual violence by offering mutual support. Finally, the risks and vulnerabilities involved in speaking out and feminist activism against sexual violence, as well as the potentials and benefits, are longstanding and are not the result of social media. The internet has just provided a space in which feminist speech can be enacted, amplified, demanded, scrutinised, invalidated and erased, as feminisms and backlashes operate and collide. Therefore, there remains a need to tackle the positioning of speaking out as the solution to

sexual violence which demands survivors publicly share their trauma and instead collectively work towards a world in which speaking out is no longer required.

CHAPTER FOUR: (RE)CLAIMING BODIES AND VISIBILITIES? RETHINKING THE NOTION OF “RECLAIMING” IN THE CONTEXT OF FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM

5.1 Introduction

The term “reclaiming” is repeatedly centralised in discourses surrounding feminist depictions of bodies, particularly the female nude, however its use often goes unquestioned. This chapter seeks to problematise the attribution of the term “reclaiming” to feminist depictions of the body and instead shift the focus onto transformative processes such as redefining, reimagining and reworking. “Reclaiming” presupposes something has been lost or stolen and that ownership is being taken back. Also, it suggests that once something has been reclaimed it is now completely detached from that which it was (re)claimed from, which in this context is almost entirely impossible due to entrenched oppressive structures.¹

Furthermore, what reclamation or the act of reclaiming looks like in relation to the female body is unclear. Consequently, notions like redefining, reworking and reimagining are perhaps more beneficial to the understanding of feminist artistic practices surrounding the body. These tactics encapsulate the non-linear, reactive, ongoing and explicitly political strategies of fourth wave visual culture and activism more broadly, as well as the active relationship between the second and fourth waves, particularly the ways in which the fourth wave reworks second wave feminist tactics and discourses for a contemporary context. Also, this reframing allows for an exploration of the ways in which feminists are politically constructing and making visible counter-hegemonic and alternative meanings, narratives and representations through such transformative processes and thus destabilising and

¹ Throughout this chapter, I often use the term “(re)claimed”. This is to question the extent to which something can be *re*-claimed in a patriarchal society in which women have historically been oppressed and subjugated.

transgressing patriarchal boundaries which seek to contain and control women's bodies.

Indeed, Lynda Nead identifies a dual function in feminist art: the critiquing of existing norms and values and the construction of new alternative progressive meanings.²

But who are these practices being done for and who is benefitting from them? Despite the increased visibility of feminism during the fourth wave, certain bodies and experiences continue to be rendered invisible due to heteropatriarchal standards. In relation to art historical tropes, Nead argues that "the patriarchal tradition of the female nude subsumes the complex set of issues and experiences surrounding the representation of the female body within a single and supposedly unproblematic aesthetic category".³ Consequently, the female nude can be understood as a "tyranny of invisibility", "a tradition of exclusions", rendering non-idealised bodies invisible.⁴ Evidently, this is also mirrored in the wider cultural arena. Therefore, feminist art has attempted to claim the right to self-definition and self-representation as an "insistence on the right to make and be visible" new subjectivities, bodies and lived experiences that have previously been obscured and omitted within Western tradition and its "culture of physical perfection", as art can be understood as a gauge of social visibility more broadly.⁵ The fourth wave utilises digital networked technologies to make visible in the public sphere that which is typically rendered invisible by the hegemonic patriarchal culture, thereby resisting shame and patriarchal idealisations,

² Nead 1992, p. 62. The relevance of Nead's work, which was published at the beginning of the third wave, to fourth wave visual culture exemplifies the fundamental continuities within feminist artistic practices across waves.

³ Nead 1992, p. 33.

⁴ Nead 1992, p. 60.

⁵ Nead 1992, pp. 60-61.

conventions and expectations. However, (in)visibility can also be weaponised as a mode of control, surveillance and objectification against particular bodies, especially online, which is particularly pertinent within a postfeminist sensibility. Therefore, visibilities can enable, hinder or problematise such transformative processes outlined above, further highlighting the battleground fourth wave feminists are forced to navigate and negotiate online. This is exemplified by Emilie Zaslaw who explains that:

As feminist critiques of normative beauty culture and sexual objectification have become neutralised and incorporated into feminist iconography and mainstream media, female bodies are at once coded as powerful, sexual, political, distracting, agential and in need of control.⁶

The central debate amongst feminists concerning the representation of the female (nude) body in feminist art is between those who see it as a political act of liberation and empowerment and those who regard it as self-exploitation and reinforcing patriarchal conventions of objectification and the male gaze.⁷ This is a debate which is as prevalent now as it was during the 1970s feminist art movement. I do not want to wholly condemn or reject, nor reductively celebrate feminist body art and depictions of the female nude by feminist artists.⁸ Instead, I question the extent to which such feminist artistic practices can and should be understood as an act of “reclamation” and explore how shifting the focus onto notions of reimagining, redefining and reworking can benefit the understanding of feminist, particularly fourth wave, depictions of the body. Using fourth wave feminist art

⁶ Zaslaw 2018, p. 105.

⁷ The term “male gaze” was coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 essay entitled ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.

⁸ For an example of the feminist condemnation of feminist body art for its supposed essentialism, see Kelly 1981.

criticism, as outlined in my thesis introduction, I conduct comparative analyses of feminist artworks which explore bodies and (in)visibilities across feminist waves, largely centring on (dis)continuities between the second and fourth waves, to reveal more about the, often contradictory, principles and tactics of fourth wave feminism.

In the first comparative analysis I focus on depictions of the female nude which span three feminist waves: Joan Semmel's self-nudes, predominantly *Secret Spaces* (1976) and *Me Without Mirrors* (1974), Christine Yahya's online body positive depictions (2019-2020) and Jenny Saville's *Branded* (1992). These works will enable me to examine how bodies and experiences, which are rendered invisible by the hegemonic patriarchal culture, are made visible by feminist artists as a way to reimagine representations of the female nude and in turn destabilise patriarchal idealisations, expectations and conventions. Nevertheless, whilst such an examination reveals the productive potential of visibilities, their implications, problems and limitations are equally as exposed, particularly in relation to the context of the fourth wave and the online body positive movement. In the second comparison I discuss Cassils' contemporary reworking (2011-13) of Eleanor Antin's *CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972) and Lynda Benglis' advertisement in *Artforum* (1974), to explore how Cassils reworks not only that which is heteropatriarchal but also that which is feminist. Furthermore, I argue that by foregrounding gender ambiguity and ambivalence and resisting binary gender classification, Cassils reimagines how gender is perceived and interpreted, rather than seeking to reclaim the trans body. The final section analyses feminist depictions of the menstruating body and how menstruation is made visible by feminist artists to tackle shame and societal taboos by comparing Judy Chicago's *Red Flag* (1971) and fourth wave

photographic images of menstruating bodies posted to Instagram (2015-20). Such an exploration reveals the lack of progress in tackling such issues and the limitations of striving for visibility, as exemplified by the infamous censorship of Kaur on Instagram.

5.2 Situating the Notion of “Reclaiming” Within Fourth Wave Feminism

Whilst the term “reclaiming” has seemingly gained a new currency during the fourth wave, it is not unique to the fourth wave, as evidenced by the Reclaim the Night protests, which began in the UK in 1977 and continue today. However, since the emergence of the third wave there has been much discourse on the ways in which younger feminists are “reclaiming” feminism, which is closely tied to feminisms’ increased visibility over recent years.⁹ Evans argues that this reclamation project, which has become and remained a constituent part of feminist objectives, is public resistance against anti-feminist backlashes in order to reclaim the feminist label from negative associations and stereotypes and reinvigorate the movement.¹⁰ This can also be regarded as a form of feminist “rebranding”. Indeed, Rivers highlights that following the so-called backlash in the 1980s and 90s and the rise of postfeminism, the need for feminism to be rebranded has been emphasised, often focussed on challenging negative feminist stereotypes in order to appeal to a younger generation of women who had recently repudiated feminism.¹¹ This resulted in an attempted neoliberal “rebranding” of feminism by making it appear more fun, non-

⁹ For example, Catherine Redfern and Kristin Aune’s 2013 book *Reclaiming the F Word*.

¹⁰ Evans 2015, p. 60. Fourth wave examples of this reclamation project include: *We Should All Be Feminists* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2014); *Feminists Don’t Wear Pink and other lies: amazing women of what the F-word means to them* curated by Scarlett Curtis (2018); and “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” t-shirts, all of which seek to popularise and celebrate the feminist label.

¹¹ Rivers 2017, p. 57.

threatening, “sexy”, appealing and commodifiable, with a focus on individual choices, consumerism, sexuality, femininity and empowerment, in order to encourage young women to identify as feminists, all of which is evidently nurtured by a postfeminist neoliberal context.¹² Despite the benefits of such reclamation projects, they can often serve to further an oppositional framing of feminist waves and reinforce the negative stereotypes charged against the second wave. It suggests that there is a need to retrieve the feminist label from the grasps of “bra-burning feminists”, enabling young women to distance themselves from such tropes.

Rivers asserts that it is overly simplistic and homogenising to suggest that the arrival of the fourth wave and the resurgence of engagement in feminist activism, particularly among young women can be attributed to feminism being made more appealing through commercial rebranding.¹³ Nevertheless, this notion of rebranding or reclaiming feminism shows the extent to which the fourth wave intersects and overlaps with neoliberal and popular feminisms and postfeminisms, as well as how an oppositional framing of feminist waves is foregrounded. However, due to the (dis)continuities between feminist waves, it is perhaps more beneficial to view this process as “reworking”, which is particularly pertinent to Grant’s conceptualisation of “fans of feminism”, which I discuss in more detail further on.¹⁴ The fourth wave actively incorporates, employs and reworks tactics, discourses and principles of previous waves, particularly the second wave, in response to contemporary

¹² An example of this “rebranding” is Caitlin Moran’s *How To Be a Woman* (2012).

¹³ Rivers 2017, p. 57.

¹⁴ Grant 2011.

social, political, economic and cultural factors, which encompasses the complex and overlapping relationship that exists between waves.

Alongside the notion of “reclaiming feminism”, the term “reclaiming” has gained significant currency within fourth wave feminism, especially in relation to bodily autonomy, empowerment and choice. Unlike during the second wave, the term, as it is often employed during the fourth wave, is inextricable from a postfeminist sensibility, thus its use often reproduces and reinforces hegemonic patriarchal norms and conventions, particularly that which pertain to the female body. Indeed, Rivers argues that the wider discourse of postfeminism suggests that women are sufficiently liberated to reclaim and use their own sexualised imagery as subversive tool to undermine patriarchal norms rather than simply reinforcing them.¹⁵ This can be linked to the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification, as identified by Gill, which is objectification in a “new and even more pernicious guise”, with the “pervasive re-inscription of women as sexual objects” alongside feminist resurgences.¹⁶ Gill asserts that women are no longer presented as being straightforwardly objectified by men as passive, mute objects.¹⁷ Instead, they are portrayed as active, confident, assertive and desiring sexual subjects who “chose” sexual objectification and to present themselves in a seemingly objectified manner on patriarchal terms “because it suits their liberated interests to do so”.¹⁸ This postfeminist contradiction, which portrays women as having autonomous control over their bodies whilst choosing to present

¹⁵ Rivers 2017, p. 85.

¹⁶ Gill 2003, pp. 101 and 105.

¹⁷ Gill 2007, p. 151.

¹⁸ Gill 2007, pp. 151 and 153.

themselves in a way that will be objectified by the male gaze, can also be regarded as “pseudoliberal”, as termed by Michelle S Bae.¹⁹ Gill maintains that a key problem with the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification is the “notion that women are pleasing themselves and are freely choosing”, which is congruent with broader postfeminist discourses, as it presents women as autonomous and no longer constrained by systemic inequalities. This fails to account for why women as “completely free agents” “choose” to conform to patriarchal beauty standards to feel good and please themselves and neglects the internalisation of beauty ideals.²⁰

Consequently, the employment of reclamation as a (post)feminist tool through the use of the exposed and sexualised female body reproduces and reinforces hegemonic heteropatriarchal ideals, but this is masked in neoliberal, postfeminist terms of choice and empowerment, resulting in a kind of performative liberation or empowerment. It is an example of what Bae terms the “objectified-girl-as-empowering-subject”.²¹ This is particularly evident in what Theresa O’Keefe terms “femmenism” which she defines as a form of “uncontested auto-sexualisation”:

The shared space occupied by third wave and postfeminism, [which] indicates the uncritical embodiment of hegemonic, heteronormative corporealities that are unquestionably rooted within patriarchal and capitalist values. It is an emphasis on bodies as free, fun and playful.²²

¹⁹ Bae 2011, p. 29.

²⁰ Gill 2003, p. 104.

²¹ Bae 2011, p. 31.

²² O’Keefe, pp. 1 and 5. Although O’Keefe references third wave feminism, the article was published in 2014 and the case studies she uses are SlutWalk and FEMEN, which I argue are a part of the fourth wave, yet deeply intertwined with third wave tactics and discourses.

Therefore, it is positioned against associations of the second wave and tainted by neoliberalism, with the gendered body constituted in ways that reflect the language of consumption, individualism and “choice”, concealing how hierarchical structures of power are mapped on the gendered body and how the body is a site of struggle for women.²³ Consequently, the subversive potential of “femmenist” mobilisations is in part limited “through their reproduction of patriarchal hegemonic norms” and heteronormative ideals of women and sexuality, in a way that is seen not as threatening by men, but as a sexual fantasy.²⁴ Furthermore, there is a reliance on and claims to universality which further marginalise and exclude women who experience intersectionality, obscuring the structural and intersectional nature of women’s oppression, thus “widening gender hierarchies based on body difference”.²⁵ This draws into question, whose bodies are being reclaimed? And whose bodies are permitted to be reclaimed?

This is evident in the problematic attempted reclaiming of the term “slut” during the global SlutWalk movement which began in 2011. Reclaiming the word “slut” was seen as controversial partly because it was never a term which belonged to women and brought into question whether it could be *re*-claimed or, rather, whether the term was beyond redemption.²⁶ Moreover, it was based on an assumed universality which failed to take an intersectional account of the varying relationships women have with their bodies, sex, sexuality, hyper-sexualisation, slut-shaming, victim-blaming and sexual violence - particularly

²³ O’Keefe 2014, pp. 5-16.

²⁴ O’Keefe 2014, pp. 1, 5 and 11.

²⁵ O’Keefe 2014, pp. 3 and 16.

²⁶ O’Keefe 2014, p. 7.

Black women, women of colour and working-class women - rendering invisible their experiences.²⁷ This is furthered by Rivers who argues, in reference to FEMEN, that there is an assumption that women's naked bodies, especially those which are slim, middle-class, white, non-disabled, cisgender and conventionally feminine, can be so easily "reclaimed" from a frequently sexualised and patriarchal portrayal to be uncomplicatedly utilised as a feminist weapon, thus presenting a singular view of feminism that fails to take into account intersections, demonstrating a lack of awareness of nuances of difference and the importance of acknowledging women's lived experiences.²⁸

Furthermore, a slut is a postfeminist identity which was proudly adopted by privileged women long before the marches and seen as fashionable, sexy and designed to attract the male gaze and embody male fantasies.²⁹ Therefore, "proud sluts" are not regarded as promiscuous but adventurous, according to O'Keefe.³⁰ However, the claiming of such a label does not challenge policing of women's sexuality but reinforces the limited acceptability of what it means for women to be sexual.³¹ Consequently, "reclamation as a SlutWalk strategy fails as nowhere is the word 'slut' disentangled from patriarchal definitions, contested and re-imagined"; not contesting the term means not contesting the unequal relationships which created such concepts, so any irony in adopting the term is lost, as asserted by O'Keefe.³² This results in a reproduction, (re)appropriation and embodiment of heteronormative

²⁷ O'Keefe 2014, pp. 8 and 13-14. SlutWalk was criticised in relation to these kinds of issues most notably in an open letter by Black Women's Blueprint in 2011.

²⁸ Rivers 2017, p. 87.

²⁹ O'Keefe 2014, p. 7.

³⁰ O'Keefe 2014, p. 7.

³¹ O'Keefe 2014, p. 7.

³² O'Keefe 2014, p. 8.

patriarchal ideals and expectations of women and sexuality whilst attempting to challenge hegemonic societal norms.³³ This demonstrates how reclamation can result in the shoring up of patriarchal hegemonic norms and conventions as no space is given to allow for the explicitly feminist reimagination and redefinition of meanings, narratives and conceptualisations. That which is being (re)claimed remains fixed within its original patriarchal conceptualisation, meanwhile it is celebrated by women under the guise of “choice”, autonomy and empowerment. Overall, within the (post)feminist rhetoric of “reclaiming” there is an over privileging of visibility, in which hyper-visibility or exposure is positioned as the route to “reclaiming” autonomy, empowerment and liberation or the way in which they can be observed and determined in others. Therefore, problematising the notion of “reclaiming” allows for a consideration of the limitations and problems of (in)visibility, particularly in the context of social media and postfeminist conditions.

5.3 Processes of Visibility

Due to the fourth wave’s coexistence, intertwining and overlapping with popular feminism, it often operates within the “economy of visibility”, which I outlined in chapter two. For the purposes of this chapter, it is important to highlight that within an economy of visibility feminist expressions that do not surpass their own visibility, such as popular feminism’s “vague aspirational expressions, affirming body positivity and self-confidence”, are privileged over those that require more engaged contemplation, as argued by Banet-Weiser.³⁴ Furthermore, popular feminism uses media and networks to restructure feminism

³³ O’Keefe 2014, pp. 5 and 11.

³⁴ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 101 and 104.

to focus on the (visible) individual (body) as opposed to collective politics and structural oppression, which is a mechanism within an economy of visibility and is evidently nurtured by neoliberalism.³⁵ These are both issues which I return to in the first comparative analysis of this chapter.

Whilst the feminisms I examine in this thesis are more concerned with structural and intersectional critique, they often benefit from and rely on the visibility and popularity granted to more media-friendly iterations of feminism within economies of visibility. Consequently, the fourth wave treads the line between an economy of visibility and politics of visibility, situated in the precarious space between the two whilst negotiating and navigating these conflicting modes of visibility. Politics of visibility is the process of making visible a political category or marginalised identity to raise awareness of discrimination and oppression as part of a political struggle which can hopefully prompt social change.³⁶ Therefore, visibility is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself, as it is in economies of visibility. As this chapter explores, the fourth wave often uses visibility as part of transformative processes to construct alternative narratives, conceptualisations and representations centring on women's bodies and ultimately destabilise patriarchal boundaries. However, regarding the fourth wave and its visual culture, it can be seen that visibility is both an end and a means to an end. This reliance on visibility can result in the economy of visibility limiting feminist attempts to pursue visibility as part of a political struggle. This is supported by Banet-Weiser who highlights that logics of an economy of

³⁵ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 32, 167 and 62.

³⁶ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 22 and 62.

visibility constrain and regulate feminist attempts to harness politics of visibility, with such attempts “the discursive move is to reposition these politics within an economy of visibility, where collective feminist politics [...] are reframed to conform within the structures of this economy: safe, palatable, friendly and normative”.³⁷ This becomes particularly apparent in my discussions surrounding social media, the online body positive movement, neoliberalism, individualism and postfeminism, in which the economy of visibility hinders and constrains the fourth wave’s attempts to utilise politics of visibility to forge social and cultural change.

5.4 (In)visible Bodies

Monica J. Casper and Lisa Jean Moore ask, “what can account for the fact that certain bodies are hyper-exposed, brightly visible and magnified, while others are hidden, missing and vanished?”³⁸ Whilst this is certainly an important question, it is necessary to emphasise the simultaneous visibility and invisibility of particular bodies, as well as bodies that are intentionally invisible. Indeed, Peggy Phelan conveys that “there is real power in remaining unmarked and there are serious limitations to visual representation as a political goal”.³⁹

Casper and Moore argue that issues like gender, class, sexuality, race, age, disability status, citizenship and geography “shape the workings and effects of visibility and invisibility” in which some bodies are public, magnified and “visually dissected”, whilst others are erased and marginalised, with such recurring patterns revealing systems of power and local and

³⁷ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 105.

³⁸ Casper and Moore 2009, p. 3.

³⁹ Phelan 1993, p. 6.

global processes through which subjects are produced.⁴⁰ Moreover, Casper and Moore acknowledge that “some of the same conditions and properties lead to both visibility and invisibility but *in thoroughly stratified ways*”, for example how race can lead to the concealment of infant mortality rates, yet the risks supposedly posed by Black men are amplified.⁴¹ However, this consideration of invisible versus visible bodies overlooks how certain factors can result in the simultaneous invisibility and visibility of particular bodies. Furthermore, as suggested by Phelan, the binary between the power of visibility and impotency of invisibility, which is often purported, is misleading.⁴² This is evident in relation to women’s bodies, especially those who are not cisgender, middle class, heterosexual, slim, white, young, non-disabled and feminine. Indeed, Caroline Criado Perez highlights “it’s the irony of being a woman: at once hyper-visible when it comes to being treated as the subservient sex class and invisible when it counts – when it comes to being counted”.⁴³ The dichotomisation of visibility and invisibility enforces a boundary between that which is visible and that which is invisible, which fails to account for the way in which women, especially those who experience multiple intersecting oppressions, are simultaneously invisible and visible, particularly within postfeminist conditions.

Both visibility and invisibility are weaponised against women as a tool of subjugation, made visible to be surveilled, scrutinised, policed, objectified and fetishised yet rendered invisible when they do not conform to patriarchal standards as a way to enforce shame, erasure and

⁴⁰ Casper and Moore 2009, pp. 9, 19 and 180.

⁴¹ Casper and Moore 2009, p. 180.

⁴² Phelan 1993, p. 6.

⁴³ Criado Perez 2019, p. 314.

silence. Despite this, the quest for visibility remains compelling and appealing. This is supported by Phelan who asserts that “visibility is a trap; it summons surveillance and the law; it provokes voyeurism, fetishism, the colonialist/imperial appetite for possession. Yet it retains a certain political appeal”.⁴⁴ This exemplifies the complex dynamic between invisibility and visibility in the representation of women’s bodies, as well as how increased visibility is not necessarily a positive, particularly in relation to postfeminism and in the context of gendered abuse and censorship on social media.

For one thing or body to be visible, there must also be invisibility and thus exclusion. As explained by Phelan, “the visible is defined by the invisible” and “visibility and invisibility are crucially bound”.⁴⁵ Similarly, Banet-Weiser maintains that “in order for some images and practices to become visible, others must be rendered invisible”.⁴⁶ Casper and Moore also demonstrate that the disproportionate visibility and representation of some bodies can eclipse other bodies from full consideration.⁴⁷ Yet the visibility of diverse bodies is not unproblematic, as I explore in more detail regarding body positivity further on. Social media and the internet more broadly have enabled unprecedented visibility of and access to bodies which heightens and exposes both the benefits and limitations of visibility. Bodies have never been more visible than in the current moment due to social media and the internet, which has resulted in an over privileging of visibility as a vehicle for change. However, visibility does not necessarily equate to reclamation being achieved nor power,

⁴⁴ Phelan 1993, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Phelan 1993, pp. 14 and 26.

⁴⁶ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 11.

⁴⁷ Casper and Moore 2009, p. 186.

intersectional praxis, influence, genuine inclusion or representation, especially within an economy of visibility. All of this exposes both the productive potentials and problems and limitations of visibilities in relation to the female body, especially within the context of the fourth wave. Consequently, despite the unwavering overconfidence in visibility to forge such changes, feminist efforts to reimagine, rework and redefine are both facilitated and hindered by (in)visibilities, which is heightened by the intersecting contextual factors that the fourth wave responds to and is shaped by.

5.5 Making the Unseen Nude Visible: Joan Semmel, Jenny Saville and the Fourth Wave

By exploring artworks which span three feminist waves, in this section I examine how feminist artists seek to reimagine representations of the female nude in order to construct alternative conceptualisations and destabilise patriarchal idealisations and conventions. Therefore, this comparative analysis highlights striking continuities across feminist waves, in that many of the same issues and tactics continue to be centralised within feminist depictions of the female nude, as well as the continuation of patriarchal boundaries which have long concerned feminist artists and activists. Semmel, Saville and Yahya attempt to make visible the embodied female experience and that which is rendered invisible by the hegemonic culture, namely aspects of women's body which do not conform to patriarchal idealisations. This exemplifies the use of visibility to forge such reimagined portrayals of the female nude, yet this is also hindered and problematised by (in)visibilities, particularly within the online body positive movement and online feminist visual culture that centres on the visible body.

Due to the burgeoning popularity of the online body positive movement in recent years and the impact that it has had on contemporary feminisms' visual culture and discourse, it is important to set out this context before analysing the (dis)continuities between my case studies. In the current moment, body positivity is a social media phenomenon that seeks to challenge narrow appearance ideals and promote a more inclusive and positive conceptualisation of body image and acceptance and appreciation of all bodies and appearances, as defined by Rachel Cohen *et al.*⁴⁸ Whilst social media can portray unachievable body ideals for women, Rogan and Budgeon maintain that it can also "reclaim (mis)representation" from mainstream media through presenting oneself and the body positive movement.⁴⁹ However, I argue that rather than being understood as reclamation, it should be regarded as a reimagining of the representation of women by constructing alternative and more inclusive images of women and bodies. These are then positioned against the narrowed idealised version of beauty and femininity in mainstream media and culture, thereby transgressing and redefining the parameters that dictate which bodies are permitted to be on public display.

The current iteration of the body positive movement began in 2012 and was forged largely through hashtags, predominantly used by those within the fat acceptance movement (which originated in the 1960s) and was led by fat Black women and women of colour.⁵⁰ They focussed on the celebration and radical self-love of such bodies, thus challenging fatphobia,

⁴⁸ Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John and Slater 2019, pp. 47-48.

⁴⁹ Rogan and Budgeon 2018, p. 12.

⁵⁰ Yeboah 30 May 2020 [<https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/body-positivity-movement>], accessed 5 January 2021.

with the term “body positive” being “another descriptor for what the movement represented”, as explained by online content creator and body image and self-love advocate, Stephanie Yeboah.⁵¹ Although it expanded on Tumblr and Facebook, it burgeoned via content creators on Instagram and is partly a response to online movements such as thinspiration and fitspiration, as well as the negative impacts of appearance focussed (social) media and the unattainable beauty and body ideals it perpetuates.

The body positive movement is not a monolithic, homogenous movement, but it is pluralistic, fragmentary, divergent and deeply divided, encompassing a range of objectives and practices, thereby echoing the nature of fourth wave feminism. Similarly, the body positive movement exemplifies the intersection of coexisting feminisms on social media, particularly postfeminism and popular, commodity and neoliberal feminisms, as well as more politically engaged feminisms. This is supported by Darwin and Miller who assert that there is a “coterminous existence of blurring of boundaries of various feminisms within Body Positivity, including forms that align with as well as those that challenge postfeminist sensibilities”.⁵² Whilst the body positive movement is not always explicitly feminist, it intersects and intertwines with feminisms to the extent that fourth wave depictions of the female body repeatedly centre on and advocate for the central tenets of body positivity (such as self-love, body acceptance and challenging the negative impact of dominant

⁵¹ Yeboah 30 May 2020 [<https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/body-positivity-movement>], accessed 5 January 2021.

⁵² Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 1.

patriarchal feminine, body and beauty ideals) even if the artist is not explicitly aligned or identifies with the movement, as is the case with Yahya.⁵³

In this section I predominantly focus on what Darwin and Miller term “mainstream body positivity”, which is the most dominant and visible faction and is the one that corporations most often endorse.⁵⁴ According to Darwin and Miller, mainstream body positivity suggests that women need to engage in self-love as a psychological act of resistance against their objectification.⁵⁵ Such messaging often manifests in corporate campaigns and selfies and is often created by those who profit from beauty culture, conveying that beauty is attainable by all and that looking and feeling beautiful and sexy is tantamount to empowerment.⁵⁶ Consequently, mainstream body positivity is strongly characterised by postfeminism, particularly the “double entanglement” in its embrace and partial rejection of feminism, with the visibility of this faction illuminating “the extent to which movement discourse intersects with neoliberalist ideology, consumer cultures and corporate interests”, as maintained by Darwin and Miller.⁵⁷ Indeed, there is an emphasis on neoliberal and postfeminist logics such as choice as a means of empowerment, self-regulation, self-surveillance and self-objectification (or subjectification) which are encouraged by self-imaging practices and it

⁵³ Online, the body positive movement and feminisms have become so inextricably intertwined to the extent that it can be difficult to distinguish the two. Despite this overlap, the two are not one in the same. Indeed, parts of the fourth wave would resist particular aspects of the body positivity movement.

⁵⁴ Darwin and Miller 2020, pp. 7-8.

⁵⁵ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 7.

⁵⁷ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 8.

relies on the makeover paradigm which is tied to consumption.⁵⁸ Also, it embraces beauty and sexiness as key elements of a positive body image.⁵⁹

Consequently, body positivity is now governed by its own beauty standards which only diverge marginally from hegemonic ideals. Given argues that “social media gives us a chance to re-brainwash our disgusting racist, patriarchal and Western beauty standards”.⁶⁰ However, “re-brainwash” implies an internalisation of a new set of standards to replace previous ones. By centralising white, “acceptable fat”, cisgender, middle-class, non-disabled, feminine and conventionally “beautiful” women, it largely excludes and marginalises those who pioneered the movement and those who continue to be marginalised in popular culture, namely plus-sized Black women and women of colour, many of whom have since distanced themselves from the movement.⁶¹ Therefore, all of this draws into question which bodies feel the most entitled or confident to be on display in the context of social media and who is rewarded for taking up this space.⁶²

To examine how Yahya both reflects and deviates from earlier feminist depictions of the female nude in the context of online body positivity, I first focus my attention on the self-nudes of Semmel. Semmel (born in 1932) turned from abstraction to figuration in 1970, responding to her own involvement in the women’s movement and feminist art movement

⁵⁸ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Given 2020, p. 76.

⁶¹ Yeboah 30 May 2020 [<https://www.vogue.co.uk/beauty/article/body-positivity-movement>], accessed 5 January 2021.

⁶² These questions are based on Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 39.

in New York.⁶³ Reacting to the commercialisation of sex and women's bodies in the early 1970s, she began to paint couples engaging in sex in abstract colours, to distance her work from pornography, in her *Sex Paintings* (1971) and *Erotic Series* (1972).⁶⁴ These works showed women as equal sexual partners, thereby asserting female agency, "reclaiming the female nude for her own agenda" and subverting the male gaze, as maintained by Hannah Johnston.⁶⁵ In the mid-1970s Semmel turned to self-nudes and a more naturalistic palette.⁶⁶ For her self-nudes, Semmel used the camera to create preparatory photographs, similar to her earlier series. This allows Semmel to locate and structure the image to construct close-up, cropped views which become almost landscapes and abstractions when blown up to scale on the canvas, as seen in fig. 14.⁶⁷

⁶³ Semmel 2015, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Semmel 2015, p. 5.

⁶⁵ Johnston 2016 [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/semmel-secret-spaces-l04015>], accessed 6 May 2020.

⁶⁶ Semmel 2015, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Semmel 2015, p. 5.



Fig. 14 Joan Semmel, *Secret Spaces*, 1976, oil on canvas, 177.2 x 173.8 cm.

The preparatory photographs were taken with the camera positioned next to the artist's head; thus, the perspective is of the artist looking down at her body, collapsing the gendered boundaries between the active creator and passive subject (or object). This is supported by Semmel who claims that it is apparent that the artist is female, thereby further subverting the tradition of male artist and female muse.⁶⁸ Consequently, Semmel appears to seek to co-opt and disturb the male gaze and attempt to liberate the female body from the confines of objectification and male fantasies.⁶⁹ Semmel maintains that:

I was never focused on self-representation but rather on finding a way of reimagining the nude without objectifying the person, of using a specific body rather than an

⁶⁸ Semmel 2015, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Marter 1995, p. 25.

idealised form. I wanted the body to be seen as a woman experiences herself, rather than through the reflection of the mirror or male eyes.⁷⁰

In light of this, the viewer takes on the intimate viewpoint of Semmel, seeing her body as she experiences it, with the works seeking to represent female self-exploration and sensuality whilst reimagining the nude without presence of an external male gaze, as exemplified in *Me Without Mirrors* (fig. 15).



Fig. 15 Joan Semmel, *Me Without Mirrors*, 1974, oil on canvas, 127.3 x 173.4 cm. Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina.

⁷⁰ Semmel 2015, p. 6.

Joanna Frueh argues that during the 1970s feminist art movement “seeing the body through women’s eyes was a crucial aspect of women’s self-determination and self-actualisation”, as evident with Semmel.⁷¹ Frueh furthers this by maintaining that feminist artists of the 1970s strove to affirm the authenticity of their own experiences and the beauty and power of the female body as corrective to idealisations, illustrating women as makers of their own meaning as opposed to bearing man’s meaning.⁷² In this sense, alongside the process of reimagination outlined above, it can be regarded that Semmel’s self-nudes support assertions that feminist artists are somewhat (re)claiming the female body by taking control and ownership of it. Indeed, Semmel asserts that “the content has been consistently fired by my desire for the work to impact and to help change the way women are perceived and how we perceive ourselves” and the perspective of “being inside the experience of femaleness and taking possession of it culturally”, echoing the notion of (re)claiming.⁷³

However, perhaps reading the artist as female and the relationship between the subject, artist and viewer is not as straightforward as Semmel claims. Certainly, the works are intimate depictions of the female body, yet the absence of a head or another subject makes who is gazing at whom ambiguous. As such, it is plausible that the artist is separate to the body depicted, gazing down at Semmel’s body in an intimate or sexual setting. Similarly, Semmel’s supposedly agentic and autonomous figure appears somewhat passive and open to be gazed upon by viewers, perhaps even unknowingly due to the absence of the subject’s

⁷¹ Frueh 1996, p. 191.

⁷² Frueh 1996, p. 190.

⁷³ Semmel 2015, p. 7.

head. In addition to this, in attempting to represent the body as women experience themselves, Semmel's self-nudes could represent the act of self-surveillance, in which women scrutinise every aspect of their bodies and appearance, thereby presenting the female body through the lens of the disciplinary internalised gaze. Therefore, this limits the extent to which these works can be understood as acts of reclamation as well as hindering Semmel's efforts to reimagine the female nude as liberated from the male gaze.

Semmel's works have been deemed as "offensively pornographic", despite her intentions to the contrary, exemplifying the persistence of patriarchal boundaries surrounding depictions of the female nude.⁷⁴ This also demonstrates how artistic intentions can be negated by the interpretations of the viewer. Evidently, there is a persistent risk of using the female nude to convey feminist ideology, as ultimately the viewer determines how the work is perceived, as conveyed by Kathy Battista.⁷⁵ Joan Marter asserts that Semmel attempted to defy "feminists who claimed that any representation of the nude female was destined for objectification".⁷⁶ Nevertheless, artworks are open to interpretative possibilities in which they can be reappropriated into voyeuristic traditions of female nude, as highlighted by Nead.⁷⁷ But, Nead also explains that turning the female body into female nude is not only an act of regulation of the female body but also of the viewer whose wandering eye is disciplined by conventions and protocols of art.⁷⁸ Evidently, Semmel is seeking to reimagine rather than

⁷⁴ Semmel, Modersohn-Becker, Antin and Withers 1983, p. 29.

⁷⁵ Battista 2013, pp. 132-33.

⁷⁶ Marter 1995, p. 26.

⁷⁷ Nead 1992, p. 61.

⁷⁸ Nead 1992, p. 6.

regulate her body and in doing so she controls the gaze of the viewer, as they view her body how she experiences it. Nevertheless, in the context of social media, which I turn to next, the gaze is infinite, unknown, invisible and uncontrollable and such private modes of looking are not governed by public conventions. Furthermore, the original creator or poster has no control over the image once it has been uploaded, so the image is open to circulation, adaptation and misinterpretation. This risk is heightened by the coexistence of feminisms and anti-feminisms online, contributing to the sense of vulnerability and precarity that women experience on social media.

Yahya is an Armenian-Australian illustrator based in Sydney and the artist behind Pink Bits (@pink_bits), an Instagram profile started in 2016 which shares artworks that depict parts of the human body and diverse bodies which are often rendered invisible. In other words, “illustrating the bits and shapes we’re told to hide”, as Yahya explains in @pink_bits’ Instagram biography. Like Semmel, fig. 16 conveys how women experience their own bodies through the use of perspective, showing a seated figure looking down at their thighs, pubic area and stomach. Meanwhile, although Yahya’s work in fig. 17 does not share the same visual perspective as Semmel’s self-nudes, it conveys an intimate experience of the body, which similarly seeks to make visible the embodied female experience. Perhaps the work depicts a selfie taken by the subject, due to the position of the arm which extends beyond the frame and the perspective of the image, as though the figure was holding the camera at thigh level, angled slightly upward. In these examples and in Semmel’s self-nudes the head is cropped and the body is fragmented and separated from itself. The underwear and cropping in fig. 16 almost slices and abstracts the body, creating a disjointed and somewhat distorted

depiction. But rather than being an act of control or confinement, the cropped-in artworks seek to forge self-acceptance by focussing on aspects of women's bodies that are typically rendered invisible.



Fig. 16 Christine Yahya (Pink Bits), 2020, illustration posted to Instagram.

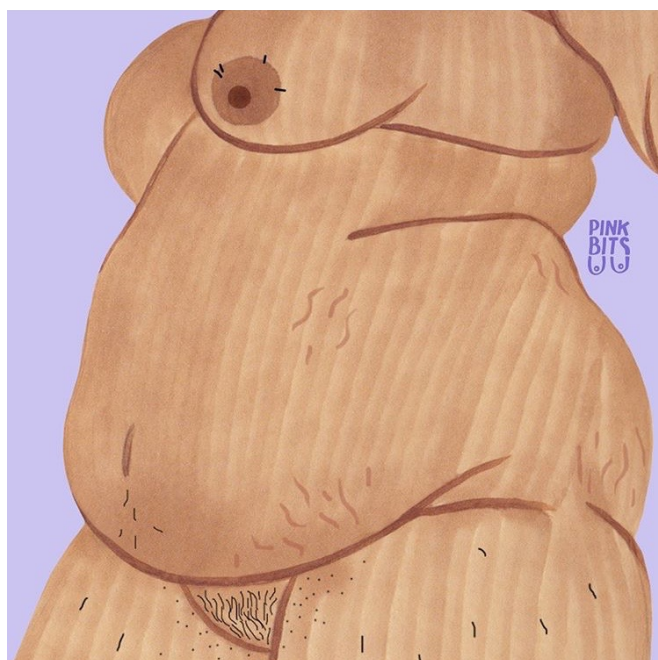


Fig. 17 Christine Yahya (Pink Bits), 2019, illustration posted to Instagram.

Both Semmel and Yahya are reimagining the female nude as liberated from patriarchal beauty and body standards by creating counter-hegemonic images which represent embodied experiences and aspects of women's bodies that are rendered invisible within the hegemonic culture. Yet the subject's individuality is maintained, even though the head is absent. This is reflected in the intentions behind Pink Bits which "strives to create illustrations that represent as many individuals as possible and provide representation for the daily realities, diverse bodies and art for those who are not commonly featured in our media-dense society".⁷⁹ Both Semmel and Yahya depict fleshy folds and Yahya shows body hair, stretch marks and scars, parts of the body that are often hidden, yet they are also indicators of the individual.

This also works to challenge the reductive and objectifying ways in which female bodies are viewed and perceived. Matich, Ashman and Parsons demonstrate that fourth wave feminism seeks to celebrate the diverse and unfettered bodily form to destabilise conformist heterosexual male fantasies of the female body, which is evidently a central aspect of Yahya's work.⁸⁰ But, this is not limited to the fourth wave, as Yahya's work demonstrates a continuation of many of the concerns faced by feminist artists of the second wave, such as Semmel, as well as the tactics used to challenge such issues. Frueh argues that feminist artists of the 1970s became aware of idealisations of the female form and that "real" bodies were taboo, "so it was left to them to create works critiquing and challenging society's

⁷⁹ Pink Bits [<https://pink-bits.com/pages/about>], accessed 1 December 2020.

⁸⁰ Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2018, p. 347.

homogenised dictates”.⁸¹ They also sought to “reclaim the female body for women”, asserting their ability to create their own aesthetic pleasures by representing women’s bodies and bodily experiences, all of which is evident in Semmel’s self-nudes.⁸² Therefore, it is evident how fourth wave artists are continuing the work and tactics of second wave artists in order to further reimagine and depict the female body and bodily experiences as liberated from patriarchal idealisations.

Cohen *et al* demonstrate that “acne, cellulite and stretch marks are only typically depicted in mainstream media in the context of a celebrity’s body being scrutinised for such ‘flaws’ or an advertisement for a beauty product to eliminate them”.⁸³ Consequently, making such societally deemed flaws visible for the purposes of self-exploration and acceptance rather than consumption and policing appears to be a fundamental part of Semmel and Yahya’s efforts to reimagine the ways in which women’s bodies are represented and viewed. Nead demonstrates that female bodies which do not conform to beauty ideals are regarded as transgressive and disruptive and are managed within consumer culture by rendering them invisible or subjecting them to stereotypes.⁸⁴ However, Yahya’s celebratory and light-hearted depictions of corporeal realities such as stretch marks, disabilities, body hair and fat shift the context surrounding such issues from one of scrutiny, shame and erasure to that of acceptance, celebration and inclusivity, as evident in fig. 18. Indeed, Pink Bits is “inspired by

⁸¹ Frueh 1996, pp. 190 and 195.

⁸² Frueh 1996, p. 190.

⁸³ Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John and Slater 2019, p. 53.

⁸⁴ Nead 1992, p. 77.

and celebrates people and bodies in all their glory”.⁸⁵ Therefore, Yahya’s display of diverse and non-conforming bodies within the public sphere reimagines them as liberated from policing and the boundaries which dictate which bodies are permitted to be visible, empowered and accepted.

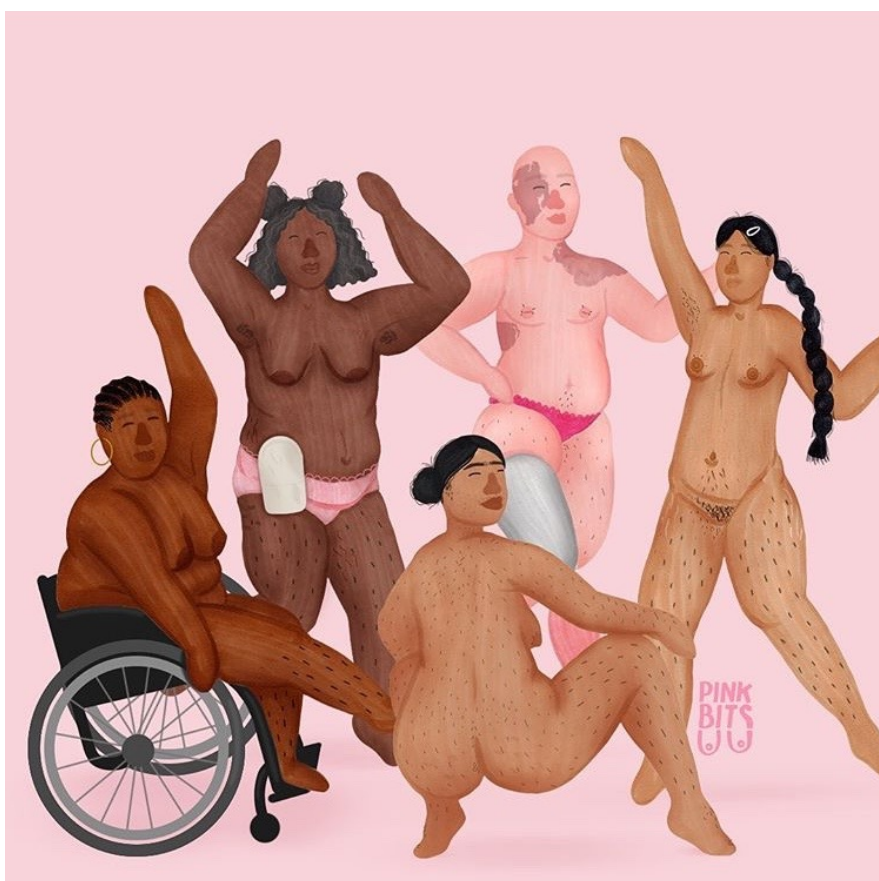


Fig. 18 Christine Yahya (Pink Bits), 2019, illustration posted to Instagram.

All of this is furthered by Naomi Wolf, in her seminal third wave text *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, who highlights that images of women in “the beauty myth”, which she defines as a “violent backlash against feminism that uses images of

⁸⁵ Pink Bits [<https://pink-bits.com/pages/about>], accessed 1 December 2020.

female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement", are reductive and stereotypical, displaying a limited number of "beautiful" faces and bodies.⁸⁶ As a result women see their options as limited.⁸⁷ This extends to censorship through editing and airbrushing, thereby preventing women from knowing that there are as many variations of bodies as there are women and instilling a lack of self-confidence and a sense of being alone in one's non-conforming body.⁸⁸ Therefore, images which depict a diverse range of bodies, such as fig. 18, raise awareness of and make visible the (typically erased) variations in women's bodies and foster solidarity based on the commonality of women's relationships to their bodies at the hands of the patriarchy. This is supported by Wolf, who advocates for the need to see a variety of female nakedness, to reveal and celebrate the beauty of infinite variations and individualities in a way that unites women.⁸⁹ Indeed, images like fig. 18 can be seen as a uniting force which foster a greater sense of collectivity through the celebration of individuality and diversity, which perhaps challenges the notion that the individualism of fourth wave feminism is counter-productive to collective politics.

By being critically aware of the implications of the myth and seeking out, absorbing and compiling an alternative "personal counterculture of meaningful images of beauty", thereby seizing control of the representation of women, Wolf argues that the myth can be revealed

⁸⁶ Wolf 1990, pp. 10 and 50. By using Wolf's seminal third wave text to analyse fourth wave visual culture, I hope to demonstrate the continuation of issues and concerns pertaining to the "myth" that remain prevalent within contemporary feminist activism, particularly in light of the online body positivity and self-love movements, as well as the intersections and overlapping of the third and fourth waves.

⁸⁷ Wolf 1990, p. 50.

⁸⁸ Wolf 1990, pp. 246-47.

⁸⁹ Wolf 1990, pp. 280 and 285.

as an image of violence and new ways of seeing become apparent, resulting in liberation.⁹⁰ Consequently, in the construction of inclusive and counter-hegemonic manifestations of irreducible “beauty”, such as fig. 18, the fourth wave is actively counteracting harmful images to redefine the ways in which women perceive other bodies and themselves through encouraging self-love, body acceptance and celebration, empowerment and collectivity. “A consequence of female self-love is that the woman grows convinced of social worth [...] If a woman loves her own body, she doesn’t grudge what other women do with theirs; if she loves femaleness, she champions its rights”, in a society which relies on women feeling worthless.⁹¹ Therefore, depictions of self-love and collective bodily celebration and acceptance, such as Yahya’s, can be regarded as an explicitly political act, one that serves a fourth wave feminist agenda and mobilises and unites audiences.

However, much of fourth wave self-empowerment and self-love content centres on psychic regulation, self-work and self-surveillance to liberate oneself from internalised patriarchal expectations. Within a postfeminist neoliberal context there is a heightened focus on self-surveillance, emotional labour and psychic regulation, as identified within Love Your Body discourses in media and advertising; female empowerment advertising (“femvertising”); gendered confidence rhetoric (“confidence cult(ure)”); dominant strands of the body positive movement; and popular feminist exhortations associated with self-esteem, confidence and empowerment that circulate effectively within an economy of visibility.⁹²

⁹⁰ Wolf 1990, p. 277-78.

⁹¹ Wolf 1990, pp. 18 and 145.

⁹² Gill and Elias 2014; Windels, Champlin, Shelton, Sterbank and Poteet 2020; Gill and Orgad 2015 and 2017; Darwin and Miller 2020; Sastre 2014, p. 939; Banet-Weiser 2018. Gill and Orgad (2015 and 2017) build upon

Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias assert that there is “new ‘cultural scaffolding’ for the regulation of women”, in which body regulation is no longer sufficient but needs to be accompanied with the “deeper and more pernicious” psychic regulation and labour.⁹³ This is furthered by Gill who demonstrates that surveillance has moved into the “realm of subjectivity and psychic life” in which “women [are] exhorted to relentless self-scrutiny and self-improvement”.⁹⁴ Lack of empowerment, confidence and self-esteem/love are positioned as the barriers to women’s progression and happiness and achieving them is presented as a choice and as something which can be achieved through individualised internal regulation, labour and self-surveillance, as opposed to systemic and structural change. Indeed, Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad highlight that “these internally focussed and individualised strategies of psychic labour go hand in hand with a turning away from any account of structural inequalities or of the way in which contemporary culture may impact upon women’s sense of self”.⁹⁵ They further this by conveying that there is a recurring celebration of “individual solutions to structural problems, couched in the psychological language of empowerment, choice and self-responsibility”, in which, by enacting individual changes, women can overcome inequality and transform themselves.⁹⁶ Therefore, both the problem and solution are internalised and presented as self-generated. This is reflective of what Banet-Weiser refers to as the twinned tropes of injury and capacity, which circulate with ease within an economy of visibility, in which individual capacity, such as internal

Michel Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self”, arguing that confidence has become a gendered technology of the self (2015, p. 326).

⁹³ Gill and Elias 2014, p. 185. This is also echoed in Gill and Orgad 2017, p. 26.

⁹⁴ Gill 2019, pp. 153 and 156.

⁹⁵ Gill and Orgad 2015, p. 333.

⁹⁶ Gill and Orgad 2017, p. 17.

regulation, is positioned as the resolution to both internal and external injuries experienced by women.⁹⁷ Notably, the injuries that mobilise these capacities, such as lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as mandates to just *be* confident, are the most visible within an economy of visibility, thus other injuries are rendered less visible, such as structural oppression and the conditions which result in women's lack of self-confidence or self-esteem.⁹⁸ This reflects an "individualist, corporate-friendly iteration of feminism that left power relations unexamined and simply called on women to change", echoing the work of neoliberal feminists like Sheryl Sandberg in *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* (2013).⁹⁹

Whilst fourth wave empowerment, self-love and body positive content often explicitly recognise and critique structural gender oppression and the systemic roots of internalised misogyny and shame, unlike the messaging I have outlined above, they do not go so far as to conceptualise the overhaul of such structures and systems which result in this internalisation. In the words of Given, "reprogramme your patriarchal brainwashing".¹⁰⁰ This encompasses the simultaneous awareness and critique of structural issues which cause this "brainwashing", whilst the impetus is being placed women to choose to do the individualised (unpaid) internal labour to solve it. In short, the problem is external, but the solution is internal. Indeed, Gill and Orgad show that paradoxically the refusal to surrender to

⁹⁷ For example, Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 4, 45, 72-73, 75 and 100.

⁹⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 89 and 96.

⁹⁹ Gill and Orgad 2017, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ Given 2020, p. 56. Given claims that she minimised the power of internalised misogyny through years of "retraining". Throughout her debut book, Given sets out self-monitoring, introspective and self-questioning practices and activities for the reader to challenge their own internalised misogyny, resist harmful and self-destructive behaviours and enact self-love.

oppressive messages involves constant self-work and self-governance and intense labour which is associated with embracing feminist language and goals.¹⁰¹ All of this is evident in Yahya's ongoing participatory project entitled *The Unlearning Project* that began in 2020 and invites submissions from the public, which centres on interrogating what has been learned, unlearning the "lessons society/patriarchy have taught us" and replacing this internalisation with new lessons.¹⁰² Consequently, women are required to treat their injuries, recognising their cause but not actively try to prevent them from occurring in the first place, whilst simultaneously utilising individual labour to attempt to protect themselves from further harm, exemplifying the contradictions in such rhetoric.

Exhortations of "unlearning" and "reprogramming" are in many ways closely related to notions of redefining, reworking and reimagining in terms of one's inner self. Therefore, this shows how such processes can become co-opted by neoliberal and postfeminist imperatives of self-governance and individual responsibility, in which they can become psychic regulatory processes centred on self-work and self-regulation. Indeed, this emphasis on individual responsibility over collective politics demonstrates the pernicious influence of neoliberal feminism and postfeminism on more politically engaged feminisms. By focussing on the need for individual internal labour, Yahya, alongside other fourth wavers like Given, can be seen to be furthering neoliberal postfeminism or popular feminism, which obscure the need for collective politics. Individualised internal labour is presented as necessary to

¹⁰¹ Gill and Orgad 2017, pp. 23-24.

¹⁰² Pink Bits 2020

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfv8i6IJDV_yaeYgciYcVX2XAFcWgBQGR8sk3HqkIX3NjFVpA/viewform], accessed 1 December 2020.

become a liberated feminist subject and positioned as a form of activism and a way to personally enact feminism. For example, Given argues that within a society which profits from women's insecurities, "one of the most radical acts under capitalism is to simply love yourself".¹⁰³ Consequently, "a therapeutic language of healing and recovery, with an implicit deficit model in which women need psychological intervention, may be displacing earlier more explicitly political feminist interventions", as highlighted by Gill and Orgad.¹⁰⁴ The hyper-visibility of psychic regulation rhetoric within feminist discourses attempts to conceal the need for collective feminist activism to dismantle the power structures and systems which cause internalised misogyny and oppression.

This emphasis on individual action as opposed to systemic reform is also perhaps due to fatalism about the possibility of achieving long-term structural change, as psychic regulation is positioned as possessing a degree of immediacy. However, this places the power to supposedly rectify oppression in women's hands without recognising that such power does not necessarily belong to women. This shifts the blame onto women when they are inevitably unable to fully unlearn their patriarchal socialisation. In other words, it creates an illusion of autonomy in a world that renders women powerless and subjugated.

Furthermore, whilst the fourth wave emphasis on unlearning gives space to and acknowledges the negative feelings, behaviours, injuries and experiences caused by this "patriarchal brainwashing", unlike "confidence cult(ure)" and Love Your Body discourses,

¹⁰³ Given 2020, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰⁴ Gill and Orgad 2015, p. 327.

this psychic regulation can result in the silencing of women and further marginalisation of their experiences and feelings. Indeed, Gill and Elias argue that shutting down particular negative thought patterns and language about ourselves and others paradoxically involves silencing women.¹⁰⁵ It demands women solve their issues silently, in a way that is not disruptive, thus echoing “lean in” feminism which is complicit in existing patriarchal structures. Moreover, whilst Given acknowledges that having the time, capacity and resources to unpack and evaluate one’s learned and inherited behaviours and perspectives is a privilege, the portrayal of psychic regulation as an all-encompassing solution presents the journey to becoming a liberated feminist subject as universal, linear and standardised.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, it is reductive and homogenising.

Whilst embracing some neoliberal postfeminist logic, Yahya also simultaneously challenges the idealised neoliberal postfeminist subject, which is inextricably intertwined with hegemonic patriarchal standards. As highlighted by Gill, through the construction of “new femininities”, which are organised around sexual confidence and autonomy, only women who conform to postfeminist, neoliberal feminine subjectivities are constructed as an active and desiring sexual subject, namely young, heterosexual or desiring of male attention, slim and conventionally beautiful, which has become “the dominant figure for representing young women, [and is] part of the construction of the neo-liberal feminine subject”.¹⁰⁷ In addition to this, Banet-Weiser explains that the “popular feminist focus on confidence is

¹⁰⁵ Gill and Elias 2014, p. 184.

¹⁰⁶ Given 2020, p. 30.

¹⁰⁷ Gill 2003, pp. 103 and 105.

directed toward those white middle-class women who are privileged enough to expect they are entitled to confidence”, which overlaps with postfeminism.¹⁰⁸ Fig. 18 works to reimagine the portrayal of confident, autonomous and active feminine subjects by representing bodies that deviate from patriarchal ideals as possessing such fourth wave feminist ideals, thereby destabilising the idealised neoliberal postfeminist or popular feminist subject. Furthermore, Gill suggests that women who diverge from idealised versions of femininity, such as plus-sized women, are never accorded sexual subjecthood and are still subject to offensive and sometimes vicious representations.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, Yahya’s inclusive depictions of bodily acceptance seek to counteract harmful representations by portraying such bodies in a sensitive and celebratory manner, further exemplifying her effort to redefine which bodies are permitted to be perceived as visibly autonomous and confident.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that strands of contemporary feminism, namely popular feminisms within an economy of visibility, place too much focus on the visible body, particularly regarding empowerment, Love Your Body discourses and body positivity.¹¹⁰ In Yahya’s work empowerment and confidence are portrayed and made legible through bodily exposure and the visible body, which align with postfeminist and popular feminist conventions. Consequently, this somewhat reproduces and reinforces the notion that those who choose not to enact their empowerment and autonomy through public sexual subjectification are positioned as unempowered and non-sexually liberated subjects. Indeed,

¹⁰⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 23.

¹⁰⁹ Gill 2003, p. 103.

¹¹⁰ For example, Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 25 and 66-67.

Banet-Weiser asserts that “‘putting oneself out there’ in online spaces is a key mechanism of the economy of visibility, in which visibility is framed as a conduit to empowerment”.¹¹¹ This further validates a version of the feminine body, similar to that of the idealised neoliberal postfeminist subject outlined above, so those who are empowered within this context are primarily white and middle-class.¹¹² Therefore, perhaps Yahya is employing and then subverting the language of social media female empowerment content in order to position non-idealised bodies, who are often seen as disempowered, as visibly empowered. For example, the crouching figure in fig. 18 is reflective of a recurring pose in Instagram mirror “selfies”, which is used to accentuate the subject’s curves and construct an idealised sexually subjectifying image. As such, Yahya is employing this language of Instagram images to challenge and redefine postfeminist and popular feminist narratives of confidence, autonomy and empowerment.

Nevertheless, in focussing on the visible exposed body, celebratory depictions of women’s bodies, such as Yahya’s, perhaps prescribe a homogenising and reductive form of bodily acceptance that is achieved through exposure, effacing the factors that make this more undesirable or risky for some. This is supported by Alexandra Sastre who maintains that there is a “call to equate corporeal revelation with personal emancipation”, with public exposure problematically positioned as a seminal construct of online body positivity.¹¹³

Furthermore, the performative quality of the dancing figures in fig. 18 reinforces the notion

¹¹¹ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 90.

¹¹² Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 90.

¹¹³ Sastre 2014, pp. 929 and 936.

that bodily acceptance, inclusivity, liberation and empowerment are things that can be seen and in order for these ideals to be visible, exposure is necessary. This is furthered by Sastre who asserts that:

The ideology of body positivity frames the democratisation of exposure as liberatory and positions the inclusivity it embeds in the act of showing oneself as a radical move. Yet in so doing, it continues to imagine the relinquishment of privacy and the act of exposure as the devices through which bodily acceptance is obtained; rather than liberating the docile body, there is merely an extension of who is allowed to declare her compliance.¹¹⁴

In a similar sense, Semmel's supposed aim to reimagine the female body as liberated from objectification in her self-nudes centres on making her own (cisgender, non-disabled, slim and white and thus positioned as easily reclaimable) body visible, despite Semmel claiming that she was never concerned with self-representation.¹¹⁵ Semmel's use of perspective universalises and homogenises women's perceptions of their own bodies, but the depiction of her individualised body and perspective makes it difficult for those who do not look like Semmel to connect that to their own embodied experiences, thereby limiting the extent to which Semmel's attempt at reimagination or reclamation can extend beyond herself.

Whilst the depiction of diverse, usually invisible, bodies within online body positivity should be recognised and commended, there is a lack of exploration or interrogation into the intersecting oppressive systems that impact on women's embodied experiences and their relationships to their bodies. This is supported by Gill who argues that adverts and campaigns which use inclusion and diversity seem an "empty signifier", working as a means

¹¹⁴ Sastre 2014, pp. 936-37.

¹¹⁵ Semmel 2015, p. 6.

not to have to look at power relations, taking the form of a post-queer, post-race sensibility.¹¹⁶ This extends to the visual culture of fourth wave feminism in which inclusive and celebratory images of body positivity or empowerment can be reductive, simplistic and overly idealistic, in which diversity is used to signify intersectional feminism in order to appeal to wider audiences. This is evident in fig. 18, in which Yahya's inclusive depiction of bodily celebration conceals intersectionality, using inclusivity as a substitute for intersectional discourse and praxis. In fourth wave feminism, intersectional and inclusive are often used interchangeably. But inclusivity without an understanding of intersectionality can often lead to tokenism. This means that there is a lack of intersectional or structural analysis beyond the superficial or aesthetic. Indeed, Rivers asserts that flattening out complex issues, such as intersectionality, for easy use in the limited confines of social media content, effaces the work required to create intersectional feminism and obscures the distance that needs to be covered to arrive at this aim.¹¹⁷ This is, in part, due to the economy of visibility, which, as highlighted by Banet-Weiser, works to render the complexities of intersectionality less visible.¹¹⁸ More complex experiences and structural analyses of intersectionality are obscured in favour of superficial expressions of shared experience and commonality, thereby limiting such content's ability to be considered radical body positivity.¹¹⁹ However, this is not restricted to contemporary feminism, as Semmel's self-nudes give a universalising account of how women experience their bodies, whilst relying on a white, slim and non-disabled

¹¹⁶ Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg 2019, p. 12.

¹¹⁷ Rivers 2017, p. 127.

¹¹⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 25-26.

¹¹⁹ Darwin and Miller argue that radical positivity aims to shift the movement's focus from the individual towards systemic change and focuses on centring the voices and experiences of intersectionally marginalised subjects to illuminate systems of power and address the root causes of oppression (Darwin and Miller 2020, p. 11).

body as the default. Therefore, what is intended as a reimagination of how women are depicted, becomes inherently exclusionary, thereby somewhat reproducing aspects of the second wave which are often criticised.

This lack of intersectional and structural analysis obscures the more problematic, difficult and traumatic aspects of individuals' relationships with their own bodies. Abigail Solomon-Godeau demonstrates that feminist artists of the 1970s "were aware that the celebration of feminine beauty obscures more disturbing and ambivalent elements".¹²⁰ Whilst fourth wave body positive artists seemingly perceive that the celebration of the visible female body acts as a vehicle of empowerment and liberation, this results in the obscuring of ambivalence, complexities and more difficult or disturbing elements which pertain to women's bodies. In fig. 18 the foregrounding of collective nudity and bodily celebration conceals the struggles women experience in relation to their bodies and embodied experiences, especially women with disabilities, plus-sized women and women of colour. As such, feminist exhortations of bodily acceptance, empowerment and self-love can be exclusionary to those facing intense bodily struggles and those who are not positioned as being entitled to confidence and empowerment within dominant discourses. All of this reinforces the reductive, linear and universal narrative which is presented as the consumable and transformative body positive journey that dictates what body positivity looks and feels like and prescribes an acceptable form of it, which is often required to be shared publicly. The public narratives follow the linear trajectory from self-hatred to self-love, from disempowerment to empowerment,

¹²⁰ Solomon-Godeau 2007, p. 343.

from body unacceptance to acceptance, from oppressed to liberated, whilst cultural and social factors remain fixed. This is furthered by Sastre who asserts that “through promoting a particular, prescribed performance of bodily acceptance, body positivity’s digital manifestation nevertheless echoes the very body histories it appears to combat”.¹²¹

Nevertheless, such a focus on the visible body within contemporary feminism may be intentional as a way for previously excluded bodies to be visible and occupy space.¹²² Due to the commodification of the body positive movement and the creation of its own beauty standards, it can be argued that Yahya’s depictions of diverse bodies and bodily celebration are not only challenging patriarchal beauty standards but also the beauty standards and expectations within the mainstream body positive movement and Love Your Body discourses. Therefore, perhaps Yahya employs the visual language of the online body positive movement to reimagine depictions of bodily acceptance and celebration. In this sense, she redefines which bodies are permitted to express this online form of body acceptance by making visible that which is rendered invisible both by the mainstream body positive movement and wider society and culture, such as body hair, disabilities, stretch marks, skin conditions and scars.

However, whilst Yahya attempts to resist the exclusion and invisibility of certain bodies within mainstream media, the hegemonic culture and the mainstream body positive movement, she does not interrogate the systems of power which create and maintain such

¹²¹ Sastre 2014, p. 935.

¹²² Cohen, Irwin, Newton-John and Slater 2019, p. 54.

oppressive and exclusionary standards and ideals. As maintained by Phelan, “gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinising the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda”.¹²³ Moreover, despite challenging certain aspects of the mainstream body positive movement, Yahya’s work also further obscures that which is typically concealed within body positive and empowerment visual culture and discourses, as I have argued, such as intersectional and structural analysis and more complex, ambivalent and problematic aspects of women’s relationships to their bodies. Overall, this demonstrates the ways in which (in)visibilities can limit efforts to reimagine representations of women’s bodies.

To bridge the temporal gap between Semmel and Yahya, I now turn to the work of Saville during the third wave. Saville (born in 1970) was a member of the Young British Artists and is most renowned for her large-scale depictions of fleshy, fat female bodies. In the 1990s Saville produced a series of paintings of her head on an outsized female body, intended to disturb viewers’ assumptions and prejudices.¹²⁴ For example, in *Branded* (fig. 19) the gaze of the viewer, who is located at stomach height (the same perspective as Yahya’s work seen in fig. 17), is returned in the form of a downward stare, defying the audience’s immediate response to revolt or pity.¹²⁵ The subject’s attitude towards her body and deviation from hegemonic ideals is ambiguous, as exemplified by the figure squeezing her flesh, which can be read as defiant, indifferent or an act of self-loathing. In my view, the expression,

¹²³ Phelan 1993, p. 26.

¹²⁴ Borzello 1998, p. 205.

¹²⁵ Borzello 1998, p. 205.

downward gaze and pose in *Branded* is unapologetic, assertive and defiant, whilst simultaneously indifferent, unfazed and unimpressed. She looks down on the viewer, reversing the ways in which fat female bodies are subjugated. In both Semmel's self-nudes and *Branded* there is a sense of irreducible presence, embodied female existence and palpability in the flesh depicted, as exemplified by the subject in *Branded* holding a handful of her stomach and the undulating corporeal landscape in *Secret Spaces*, all of which is also echoed in Yahya's work, as seen in fig. 17. The scale and depiction of embodied presence in Semmel's and Saville's works contrast patriarchal expectations which require women to reduce themselves to conform to body and feminine ideals by filling the viewer's field of vision with flesh. Semmel's nudes are not vulnerable, passive or fragile but "healthy, whole and fully sexual", as argued by Marter.¹²⁶ Moreover, the scale of Saville's *Branded* challenges how such bodies are rendered invisible, with the figure's gaze and defiance furthering this irreducibility, whilst also alluding to the simultaneous hyper-visibility of plus-sized bodies in terms of scrutiny, regulation and prejudice.

¹²⁶ Marter 1995, p. 28.



Fig. 19 Jenny Saville, *Branded*, 1992, oil and mixed media on canvas, 209.5 x 179 cm.

Branded draws out the tensions and discomfort in how people perceive fat female bodies and women's bodies more broadly through the figure's irreducible presence. This is furthered by Lucinda Gosling, Hilary Robinson and Amy Tobin who demonstrate that "Saville explores the discomfort that women have been made to feel about the substance of their own bodies – of themselves – being excess, too much and hateful; and she does so with a method of painting that suggests tenderness and love for that flesh".¹²⁷ Whilst *Branded* is not necessarily a statement on body positivity, as it is currently understood, the agentic subject is presented as a work of art to be gazed upon, whilst looking down on the viewer

¹²⁷ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 202.

from above. Therefore, Saville reimagines the ways in which the fat female body is portrayed, which in popular culture is often harmful, oppressive and degrading.

The faint words scribbled on the body in *Branded*, such as “delicate” and “pretty” are not just attempts at irony and subversion but allude to the objectification and regulation of women’s bodies in their echoing of the branding of cattle and the felt-tip marks made by cosmetic surgeons.¹²⁸ Notably, the writing on one’s body is a recurring trope within the current iteration of the body positive movement, either to reclaim harmful words and stereotypes or to cover one’s body in affirmations of self-love and acceptance. Therefore, the act of writing on one’s body can be seen as an act of reclamation and resistance. The series *Signed By Trump* by Aria Watson shows misogynistic statements spoken by Donald Trump written onto parts of the body (fig. 20). By attaching these words to a corporeal presence, their harm becomes more apparent. Seemingly, this series not only seeks to expose the power and ownership such misogyny has over women’s bodies but also (re)claim autonomy and remove the power from such language, thus reflecting the duality of *Branded*. Language can be used to police and scrutinise women’s bodies, whilst also serve as a vehicle of resistance.

¹²⁸ Borzello 1998, p. 205.



Fig. 20 Aria Watson, *Signed By Trump*, 2016, photographic series.

Notably, *Branded* was created in 1992, the same year Rebecca Walker wrote her seminal article entitled 'Becoming the Third Wave' inaugurating third wave feminism. Although feminist waves are neither homogenous nor monolithic but are rather divergent, pluralistic and fragmented, dominant strands of the third wave are largely associated with femininity, sexuality, autonomy and individualism and are often positioned as a reaction against (the negative stereotypes of) the second wave. However, Semmel's self-nudes challenge this oppositional framing through their individualism and expressions of female sexuality, demonstrating the overlapping of feminist waves. Similarly, Semmel, Saville and Yahya, who span three feminist waves, should not be positioned in opposition to each other but rather explored in relation to their reworking of persistent feminist issues and tactics in response to

their contemporaneous context. Indeed, this comparative analysis highlights some of the continuities across feminist waves pertaining to the representation of the female nude by women artists and how feminist artists have continued the work of those who came before them.

Semmel, Saville and Yahya seek to reimagine the portrayal of women's bodies by making visible that which has been rendered invisible by the hegemonic culture and attempting to (in some ways problematically or reductively) depict the female body and embodied experiences as liberated from patriarchal ideals and the male gaze, in order to serve as vehicles of agency, celebration, empowerment and resistance. Nevertheless, efforts to achieve visibility can result in invisibilities and thus exclusions and silences. Consequently, whilst reimagined representations of women's bodies and bodily experiences can help to destabilise patriarchal idealisations and viewing conventions, this reliance on visibility is uncertain and unpredictable, with (in)visibilities limiting feminist attempts to reimagine the female nude, particularly in the context of fourth wave feminism, post and popular feminisms and online body positivity.

5.6 Reimagining the Binary: Cassils' Contemporary Reworking of Eleanor Antin's *CARVING*:

***A Traditional Sculpture* and Lynda Benglis' *Artforum* Advertisement**

Feminist artists during the 1970s often used their own bodies as a vehicle to explore how women's bodies are controlled by external forces, such as the harmful expectations placed on women through beauty ideals, traditional gender roles and notions of femininity. This often resulted in artists placing themselves in potentially dangerous or harmful situations, as

evident in Antin's *CARVING* (fig. 21). From 15 July to August 21 1972, Antin placed herself on a strict diet and documented her body every day by taking photographs of herself in the same four positions, creating the appearance of full-body mugshots, with the intention to create an academic sculpture; the ideal form.¹²⁹ Frances Borzello explains that *CARVING* is a "reference to the macho view of the sculptor cutting away the stone to release the figure imprisoned within", in which her body was the material.¹³⁰ Indeed, Antin subverts the agency and gaze of the male artist through carving her own body, thus blurring the distinction between active (male) creator and passive (female) object. Battista demonstrates that the idealisation and fetishisation of the female body, due to their status as muse and model throughout the history of art, made the female body a problematic and contentious locus for feminist artists.¹³¹ Consequently, artists nakedly presenting themselves is a deliberate and studied act "wittingly fly in the face of the mistress-model-muse tradition", as highlighted by Semmel *et al.*¹³² Whilst Battista contends that feminists artists were reclaiming the female body from its role as passive model, I argue that this is a redefining and reimagining of the female nude as a way to destabilise patriarchal artistic conventions.¹³³ Through the rigid photographic format which obscures the individual, Antin stages her own passivity, purposefully enacting the control and harm onto her own body that women experience and in turn, Antin conveys bodily autonomy in a confrontational portrayal of the self and the female body.

¹²⁹ Frueh 1996, p. 195.

¹³⁰ Borzello 1998, p. 185.

¹³¹ Battista 2013, pp. 12-13.

¹³² Semmel, Modersohn-Becker, Antin and Withers 1983, p. 28.

¹³³ Battista 2013, p. 45.

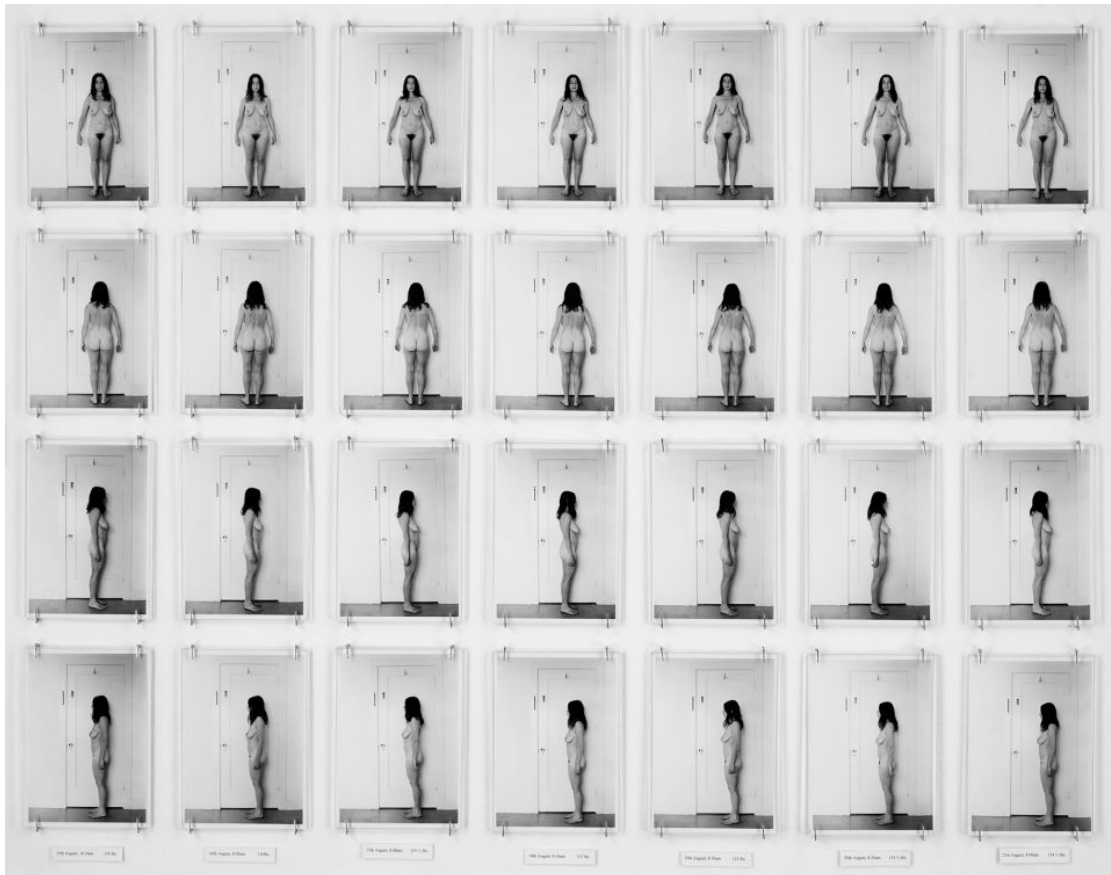


Fig. 21 Eleanor Antin, *CARVING: A Traditional Sculpture*, 1972, silver gelatin prints.

Would such extreme, invasive and potentially harmful tactics be used today in a movement fuelled by content warnings and positivity strands? In this sense, perhaps the unspoken laws and rules which dictate online feminist activity, especially the influence of body positivity, control the way in which the female body is presented - predominantly positive and celebratory - as opposed to the enactive explorations of violence, harm or control prevalent in the 1970s. Phelan maintains that, in response to the violence and harm prevalent in women's lives, feminist art of the 1970s often "repeats some form of violence in an attempt

to master and transform it”, as evident with Antin.¹³⁴ In contrast to this, much of fourth wave visual culture presents the female body as liberated from such constraints in an attempt to expose their impact, through expressions of celebration, empowerment, inclusivity and self-love, as I explored in relation to Yahya, whereas Antin exposes the disturbing and harmful aspects of feminine idealisations through the punishing carving of her body. Indeed, in drawing parallels between classical sculpture and contemporary beauty standards in regards to *CARVING*, Frueh argues that “just as the Classical Greek nude occludes women’s bodies in this kind of aesthetically rigid form, so the socially correct beautiful body disciplines – and punishes – women, through frustration, guilt, anxiety and competitiveness with women”.¹³⁵ Significantly, Borzello maintains that “alienated by the high seriousness of much of their feminist predecessors’ work, younger women artists often present themselves with a much lighter touch. Many feel that the feminist battles have been won”.¹³⁶ I disagree that younger female artists feel as though feminist battles have been won, as evidenced by the very existence of the fourth wave. However, I agree that some contemporary feminist artists may feel alienated by some of the practices used by feminist artists of the 1970s and thus lean towards more positive and joyful imagery. This is perhaps due to avoidance of radical feminist tropes, which aligns with the reclaiming (or rebranding) of feminism discussed earlier. Alternatively, perhaps it is because of a fear of and an attempt to avoid misinterpretation or misappropriation, especially due to the reliance on immediate

¹³⁴ Phelan 2007, p. 361.

¹³⁵ Frueh 1996, p. 195.

¹³⁶ Borzello 1998, p. 222.

and explicit messaging over ambiguity and ambivalence in the context of social media, which can make the artist vulnerable to abuse.

Despite this, transmasculine artist Cassils has reworked *CARVING* in *CUTS: A TRADITIONAL SCULPTURE* (fig. 22). In this piece Cassils utilised body building and nutrition to gain twenty-three pounds of muscle in the same amount of weeks, inverting Antin's process.¹³⁷ Regarded as a contrast to Antin's feminine act of weight loss, Cassils transforms the self into a traditionally masculine muscular form through "disciplined body sculpting", which is documented in time-lapsed photos, directly corresponding to Antin's images.¹³⁸ Cassils also created a two channel video installation showing the process in contrast with the material results. On day 160 of *CUTS* the artist collaborated with photographer and makeup artist Robin Black to create *ADVERTISEMENT: HOMAGE TO BENGLIS* (referencing Benglis' 1974 advertisement in *Artforum* as seen in fig. 23), examples from which can be seen in figs. 24-25. The photos were then disseminated to online and print gay fashion and art publications as images of "self-empowered trans representation".¹³⁹ Rather than seeing the process as enacting violence or potential harm to their body, Cassils experienced a sense of empowerment from creating these images at the end of a self-transformative process, although from where such empowerment derives and what it entails is ambiguous, a question which I return to further on.

¹³⁷ Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020.

¹³⁸ Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020.

¹³⁹ Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020.

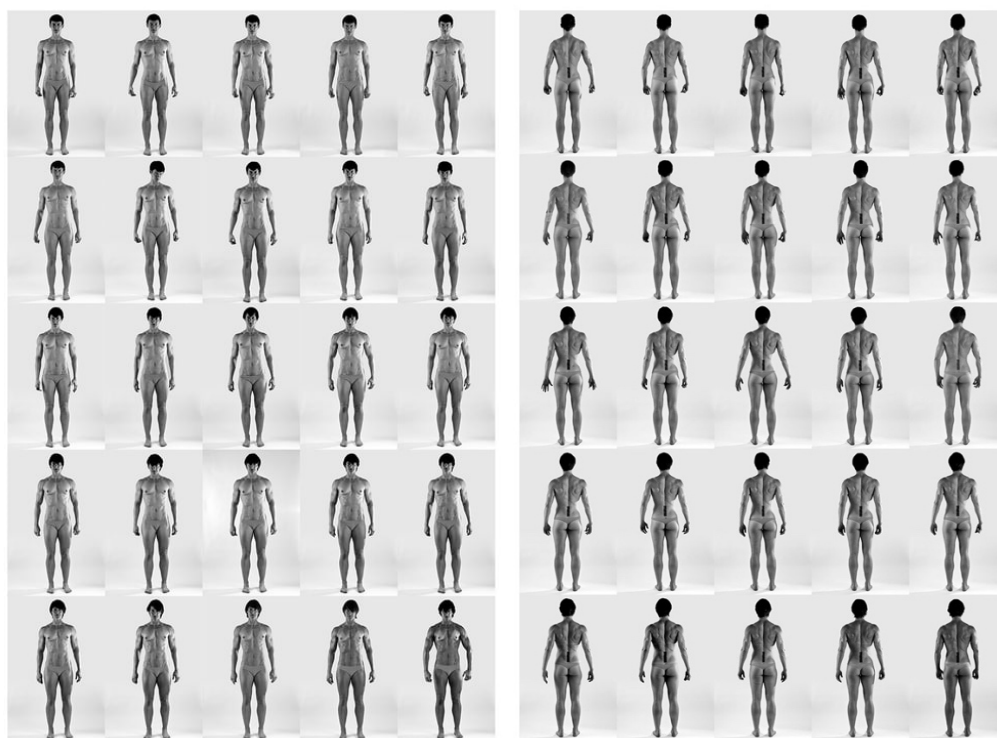


Fig. 22 Cassils, *CUTS: A TRADITIONAL SCULPTURE*, 2011-13, durational performance, video and photographs.



Fig. 23 Lynda Benglis, *Artforum* advertisement, 1974, photograph.



Fig. 24 Cassils and Robin Black, *ADVERTISEMENT: HOMAGE TO BENGLIS*, 2011-13, photograph.



Fig. 25 Cassils and Robin Black, *ADVERTISEMENT: HOMAGE TO BENGLIS*, 2011-13, photograph.

The intersection of the durational performances and time-lapsed images of both *CARVING* and *CUTS*, which reveal and explore bodily changes and processes to interrogate gendered body ideals, draws on the relationship between photography, performance and documentation. Both artists use photography to document bodily changes, or lack thereof, which occurred because of their dieting or exercise regimes, as well as the passage of time throughout their durational performances. This is captured through a series of still images taken of four vantage points of the artists' bodies at different points in time over the course of the performance, thus the images exist in relation to one another. The series of photographs are reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge, who captured motion through series of still black and white photographs (fig. 26). However, the passage of time is not visually explicit in *CARVING*, due to the lack of bodily changes, whereas in *CUTS* Cassils' transformation over time is immediately apparent, yet only becomes visible and known to viewers through its representation. In both cases the images are needed for the durational performances to be understood and viewed in its entirety, thereby creating a sense of continuity. Consequently, *CUTS* and *CARVING* could be termed "photographic actions", which Simon Baker and Fiontán Moran maintain "encompass works by artists whose practice relies heavily on the ability of photography either to capture different stages in a process or to frame and fix a performed action" (*CUTS* and *CARVING* are evidently examples of the former).¹⁴⁰ It can be argued that the durational performance was enacted for the camera, rather than a live audience. Therefore, the images extend beyond just mere documentation

¹⁴⁰ Baker and Moran 2016, p. 87.

or the evidential. Cassils and Antin play on such associations of photographs, particularly photographs of performances, through the format of their images, complicating the relationship between the performance and the camera. This highlights the complex intersection of performance and photography, the relationship between which dates back to the inception of the photographic medium in the nineteenth century.¹⁴¹

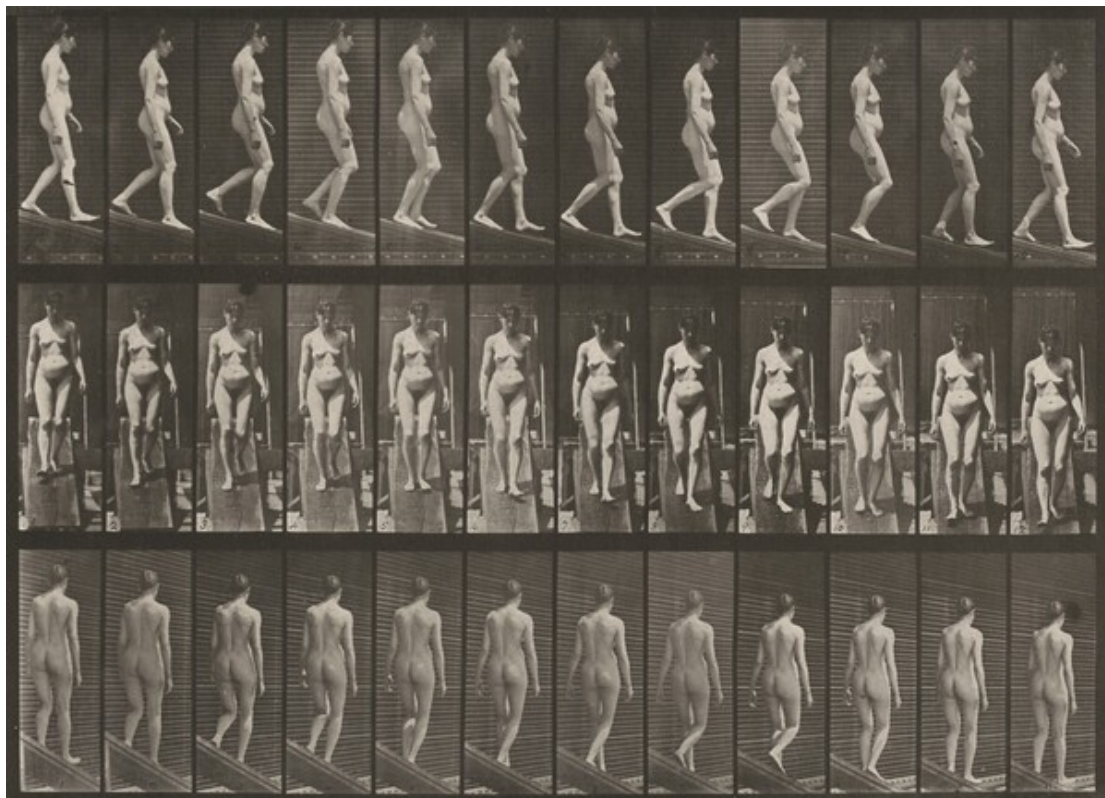


Fig. 26 Eadweard Muybridge, *Plate Number 117. Descending an Incline* from: *Animal Locomotion: An Electro-Photographic Investigation of Consecutive Phases of Animal Movements*, 1887, collotype, image: 23.5 x 32.4 cm, sheet: 47.8 x 60.4 cm. The National Gallery of Art, Washington DC.

The regulatory nature of body and gender ideals is reflected in the regulatory nature of the photographic documentation. Indeed, the full-body mugshot format in both works evokes

¹⁴¹ Baker and Moran 2016, p. 67.

the constrictiveness of body ideals and gender conformity, particular in the case of *CUTS*, whilst reimagining how gender is viewed and interpreted. Mugshots are photographs which are used to catalogue, identify and pathologise alleged or convicted criminals as a form of policing, thereby constructing the image of the criminal body. The standardised mugshot shows the individual face on, in profile and is taken from the chest up. The person is usually expressionless; thus, the image is somewhat removed of performance, yet identifiable features are visible against the blank background. This is echoed in *CARVING* and *CUTS* in which the artists are exposed in their performative process of self-transformation, yet so much of the individual is consciously concealed, forming an absent presence. In this sense, by drawing on such photographic modes Antin and Cassils play on the “commonplace [mis]conception of photography as an exemplary means of objective picture-making” within the context of performance.¹⁴² The photographic format used across both works obscures individual expression and eroticism from the images and invites inspection, critical judgement and surveillance. Whilst the sterile and unemotive documentation of the female nude in *CARVING* disrupts expectations and conventions of the male gaze, the format alludes to the use of photography as a way to surveil, regulate and scrutinise women, particularly in the media and popular culture. Borzello argues that a major concern for feminist artists of the 1970s was to “reclaim the female body from its imprisonment in art as a beautiful, voiceless object to be judged by male spectators” and to be in control in order to direct audience’s responses.¹⁴³ However, the format of *CARVING* enables and somewhat invites heightened judgement and surveillance. Antin presents her naked body to be judged as a

¹⁴² Baker 2016, p. 17.

¹⁴³ Borzello 1998, p. 193.

passive object, revealing the extent to which women internalise this pernicious scrutiny and patriarchal idealisations and enact self-regulation, as well as the role photography and art play in the perpetuation and reinforcement of such gendered surveillance and policing.

Whilst *CARVING* alludes to the carving away and removal of flesh thus reducing female presence, Cassils adds mass and moulds, gaining size and stature and heightening their bodily presentation of masculinity. Notably, the transformation is far more dramatic in *CUTS* than in *CARVING*, in which the weight loss is barely visible. The invisibility of bodily change in *CARVING* paradoxically renders visible that which is concealed; the self-scrutiny and regulation caused by unrealistic ideals. The title *CUTS* suggests an angular and somewhat violent defining of muscular features through Cassils' intense physical labour and food consumption in opposition to cuts made by a surgeon. But it could also refer to self-harm and the intense pressures of bodily ideals, contrasting the empowerment they experienced at the end of the process. Similarly, whilst *CUTS* draws on the potential harm and physical labour involved in such intensive body sculpting, it is also a celebration of discipline and the capabilities of the human body. These dichotomies perhaps reveal the conflicting experiences encountered by those outside of the gender binary when negotiating and interrogating gender and body ideals. It shows how Cassils is not just seeking to reclaim the trans body but rather highlight its ambiguity and ambivalence by reimagining the ways in which gender is portrayed and perceived.

In the context of online feminism *CARVING*, in dealing with dieting, would be seen as in direct conflict with body positivity which dominates contemporary feminist presentations of

the female form. But the documentary photographs are not a celebratory “before and after” akin to those in women’s magazines and on social media which glamourise weight loss and an unhealthy body image. Instead, they are an interrogation of the implications of the pressures to conform to patriarchal ideals, an experience almost universally faced by women, through quasi-scientific documentation in which individual expression is concealed. However, Cassils goes beyond this format by including expressionistic images in which their individualism and reworking of the gender binary are at the forefront. Consequently, although Cassils’ work is consciously based on *CARVING*, Cassils’ extension of the work beyond the documentary photographs creates a tension between the two. Despite drawing on broader issues of gender conformity and masculine body ideals, the gender expression of Cassils is highly individualised and centralised, which moves beyond Antin’s representation of collective female experience. This exemplifies the referential but often conflicting and antagonistic intergenerational relationship between the second and fourth waves in which individualist empowerment and choice is sometimes foregrounded over collective experiences of systemic subjugation. It demonstrates the impact of postfeminism and neoliberalism within an economy of visibility which place emphasis on the individual, choice and personal responsibility and in turn conceals structural forces and systemic critique.

Fourth wave expressions which focus on the empowered body largely centre on the individual rather than the collective, as evident in Cassils’ individualised self-empowerment in *ADVERTISEMENT*. Indeed, Banet-Weiser argues that in an “economy of visibility” popular feminism restructures feminist politics, reimagining and redirecting empowerment (the central logic within popular feminism) for women, so that it is often achieved through a

focus on the visible body and centres on the individual with no specification given as to what women should be empowered to do.¹⁴⁴ But, visibility as a route to empowerment is only enabled if the subject conforms to and performs valued versions of femininity.¹⁴⁵ In contrast, marginalised groups and non-normative bodies are vulnerable targets and are made hyper-visible in order to subject them to intense surveillance for the purposes of social discipline and punishment.¹⁴⁶ For example, transgender communities have fought to be seen, but now that visibility can be used as a means of surveillance and violation.¹⁴⁷ Cassils, like Antin, alludes to this surveillance and regulation through the quasi-scientific documentary photographs, allowing their body to be scrutinised. Then, in the same sense as popular feminism, achieves empowerment through rendering their gender non-conforming body hyper-visible, whilst simultaneously challenging the notion that empowerment through visibility is only permitted for feminine subjects. In turn, Cassils, in foregrounding gender ambiguity, reimagines and disturbs neoliberal popular feminist discourses of empowerment which centre on cisheteronormativity and gendered binaries.

Nevertheless, by choosing to present themselves as a hyper-visible and self-empowered being in *ADVERTISEMENT*, following a process of intense self-discipline, Cassils simultaneously reinforces neoliberal postfeminist and popular feminist framings of empowerment as an individual choice achieved through self-regulation and visibility; the notion that empowerment is something which can be performed and seen. This is instead of

¹⁴⁴ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 17 and 25.

¹⁴⁵ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 29.

¹⁴⁶ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 25-26.

¹⁴⁷ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 26.

interrogating and challenging the systems which render transgender and gender non-conforming people disempowered. However, in a society which renders non-cisgender bodies invisible, or only makes them visible for surveillance and punishment, Cassils defies this policing by forging empowerment through agentic visibility. In other words, Cassils reimagines the ways in which visibility is granted or denied to or weaponised against particular bodies. Therefore, whilst individualist expressions of self-empowerment can obscure the need for collectivity to ensure liberation, it can be a radical and political act in and of itself, especially if the body does not conform to societal normativity, which can empower others and forge collective empowerment. Consequently, to dismiss expressions of empowerment on the basis that they are individualised and achieved through visibility can erase the profundity of the experience for those who seek to forge their own empowerment in a society which renders them disempowered and invisible.

Notably, Baker and Moran highlight that:

Throughout art history the performative nature of portraiture has been used by artists to construct their own self-image. With the invention of photography and the emergence of mass media and advertising, the representation of a 'self' (albeit a constructed one) came to be used by artists to promote and question their own positions within the art market.¹⁴⁸

Benglis co-opted such advertising and self-marketing strategies in her provocative and controversial *Artforum* advertisement, in which she was advertising an exhibition of her work. In the image she appears naked covered in body grease, wearing sunglasses, with short hair and holding a large double-ended dildo to her genitals. This challenges the

¹⁴⁸ Baker and Moran 2016, p. 141.

representation of male artists in which “a penis and a defiant stance to match was still the primary formula for success in the New York art world”.¹⁴⁹ Benglis is making pointed and mocking references to the associations made between the penis and creativity. Indeed, the image interrogates the construction and phenomenon of the hyper-masculine celebrity male artist who became a mythologised figure and continued to dominate women artists within the art world by co-opting advertising strategies as a form of subversion (a prominent theme within feminist art of the 1960s and 70s).¹⁵⁰ Entitling the final photographic series *ADVERTISEMENT*, as well as explicitly referencing Benglis, Cassils alludes to marketing, consumerism and commodification. Perhaps it is an advertisement of themselves pertaining to the neoliberal branding of the self and Cassils as a brand. Alternatively, it perhaps suggests that the body they have transformed into is more commodifiable, referencing the perpetuation of masculine body ideals in advertising, such as Calvin Klein campaigns which they appear to echo, whilst also reworking them with the addition of aspects of traditional femininity, such as makeup.

Evidently, both Cassils and Benglis combine elements of hyper-masculinity and femininity and expectations to rework and reimagine hegemonic systems of representation through photography, especially regarding the representation of artists and gender. Indeed, photography has been used to question dominant modes of representation and the construction of identity since its invention in the nineteenth century.¹⁵¹ Cassils makes it

¹⁴⁹ Semmel, Modersohn-Becker, Antin and Withers 1983, p. 27.

¹⁵⁰ Baker and Moran 2016, p. 141.

¹⁵¹ Dercon 2016, p. 7.

somewhat difficult for viewers to classify their body as a binary gender, it is purposely ambiguous, alluding to the multiplicity and transformability of gender and resisting the binary classification of exposed bodies, thus perhaps challenging the binary reading of Benglis' advertisement. It is through this ambiguity and resistance to binary classification that Cassils is reworking and reimagining the ways in which gender is conceptualised and perceived, redefining how gender is reductively classified. This is furthered by their use of photography, which plays a significant role in the construction, perpetuation and interrogation of gendered and body ideals and expectations.

Cassils' website claims "Cassils's ripped, transmasculine physique substitutes for Benglis's phallus", but I do not think it works in the same way.¹⁵² In *ADVERTISEMENT*, it is Cassils' own trans body and embodied existence, which they have sculpted and formed through intensive labour and careful nutrition, is not a prop simply held to the body for the purposes of constructing a subversive self-image, as in the case of Benglis. One particular image from *ADVERTISEMENT* contains a diagram of the male and female reproductive systems superimposed over Cassils body, with the word "hate" in the centre of the uterus and a zig-zag line over Cassils lips, giving the impression of being sewn up and silenced (fig. 25). Again, despite the addition of a phallus, this image does not work in the same way as Benglis'. Instead, it is an exploration of the struggles of gender dysphoria and the embodied realities of living in a trans body, as opposed to challenging the gendered systems of representation

¹⁵² Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020.

through which the image of the artist is constructed and viewed and the hyper-masculinised portrayal of the male artist, as is the case with Benglis' advertisement.

Nevertheless, Benglis further reworks the hyper-masculinised figure of the male artist by making the contours of her feminine figure hyper-visible through her contorted, yet still defiant, posing. Benglis' use of her own naked body exposes and challenges expectations surrounding the representation of women and female sexuality, which are reinforced by images of passive and powerless women, in which their sexuality is linked to their submissiveness and their nudity is associated with vulnerability and weakness.¹⁵³ Semmel *et al* demonstrate that:

Female power and sexuality are still not a comfortable or 'natural' association for us to make, and when it is a women artist who presents herself nude as a powerful and autonomous being, the static created by such an apparently anomalous image reminds us of that discomfort. No longer a handmaiden, mistress or model, she has become her own inspiration and her own muse.¹⁵⁴

Yet Benglis presents herself as an autonomous and empowered figure by humorously drawing on the hyper-masculinised portrayal of male artists, drawing into question whether a female artist can only appear powerful by aligning themselves with masculinity. However, by making hyper-visible heightened autonomy and empowerment and reworking gendered systems of representation, both Benglis and Cassils expose and challenge the discomfort associated with the liberation and empowerment of female and gender non-conforming bodies, whilst simultaneously actively defying the structures of subjugation placed on such bodies and playfully acknowledging the continued power of those structures. But Cassils

¹⁵³ Semmel, Modersohn-Becker, Antin and Withers 1983, p. 27.

¹⁵⁴ Semmel, Modersohn-Becker, Antin and Withers 1983, p. 27.

goes beyond this by foregrounding gender ambiguity and resisting binary classification, reimagining how gender is perceived and interpreted by viewers, rather than just seeking to reclaim the trans body.

Whilst Cassils regards *CUTS* as a “reinterpretation” of Antin’s *CARVING*, I think it is beneficial to examine the relationship which exists between Cassils and Antin and Benglis in terms of *reworking* in light of Grant’s “fans of feminism” theorisation.¹⁵⁵ Grant’s conceptualisation of the figure of the fan goes beyond and challenges the mother-daughter metaphor, providing a more flexible and non-cisheteronormative model to explore the relationship that exists between second wave and contemporary feminist artistic practices.¹⁵⁶ Grant focusses on the creative potential of the fan in their reworking of, desires for and active engagement with the fan object within a contemporary context.¹⁵⁷ By explicitly referencing both Antin and Benglis, Cassils is consciously placing their own work within a feminist artistic legacy, whilst extending beyond the feminine, gendered binary and collective female experience. It can be regarded as a “queering of feminist histories” which “is a response to and a transformation of, historical moments that allows for an emotive and political resonance in the present”, as defined by Grant.¹⁵⁸ By resisting historical boundaries, Cassils reworks these artworks in a way which brings into focus the contemporary context whilst maintaining the importance of feminist history and Antin’s and Benglis’ contributions, thus clearly aligned with Grant’s

¹⁵⁵ Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020; Grant 2011.

¹⁵⁶ Grant 2011, p. 283.

¹⁵⁷ Grant 2011, pp. 283-84.

¹⁵⁸ Grant 2011, pp. 276-77.

conceptualisation of the fan.¹⁵⁹ Indeed, Cassils states that by “placing *ADVERTISEMENT: HOMAGE TO BENGLIS* within the context of LGBT-specific media signals a shift in American cultural landscape, while also conveying the role of feminist artists like Benglis in bringing about those changes”.¹⁶⁰

Grant highlights the subversive potential of the fan whereby active processes of negotiation and transformation can produce new meanings and alternative narratives.¹⁶¹ Rather than accepting what is given, the fan takes their fascination and passionate attachment as a starting point and goes beyond the object’s boundaries, in order to actively rework the object in a way that suits their needs and addresses what they see as lacking and unfulfilling in the original.¹⁶² This encompasses the tensions and (dis)continuities which exist between feminist waves. Cassils’ desire to go beyond Antin’s *CARVING* and Benglis’ advertisement actively creates new narratives which are of contemporary feminist significance, especially empowerment, transgender representation, gender identity, individuality and resisting the gender binary. Yet they also seek to make visible the continuities of feminist legacies in contemporary feminist artistic practices, particularly within body art. Grant argues that fans of feminism view feminism as something still in process and a site of negotiation.¹⁶³

Consequently:

This approach allows for an interaction with feminist histories that does not simply revere or reject, combining the past and the present in an active dialogue, one that

¹⁵⁹ Grant 2011, pp. 274 and 276.

¹⁶⁰ Cassils [<https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-cuts>], accessed 6 May 2020.

¹⁶¹ Grant 2011, pp. 271 and 283.

¹⁶² Grant 2011, pp. 271 and 283.

¹⁶³ Grant 2011, p. 286.

does not seek to simply reinstate the past, but to rework it differently, passionately and perhaps even politically in the present.¹⁶⁴

Therefore, Cassils is not just reimagining, reworking or redefining that which is heteropatriarchal but also that which is feminist in order to address contemporary issues and most notably, resist the gender binary. By portraying gender ambiguity and ambivalence and resisting gender classification, Cassils goes beyond the gender binary that is evident in Antin's and Benglis' work and reimagines how gender is perceived, rather than simply attempting to reclaim the trans body. This framing of reworking will provide a particularly useful lens through which to explore second and fourth waves depictions of menstruation in the following section of this chapter.

5.7 Visibility as a Weapon Against Shame: Feminist Depictions of the Menstruating Body

Feminist artists have long sought to interrogate, make visible and represent taboo or shameful bodily experiences which are hidden, one of the most prominent examples of which is menstruation, which remains a central theme within fourth wave visual culture. Simone de Beauvoir conveys that the magnified experiences of shame intertwined with menstruation are linked with feelings of fear, humiliation, anxiety and repugnance.¹⁶⁵ Shame is an insidious cycle in that it causes disgust, silence and secrecy, which in turn only serves to intensify and perpetuate feelings of shame. As identified by Beauvoir "the social context makes menstruation a malediction".¹⁶⁶ This is reflected in the cultural context in that "the

¹⁶⁴ Grant 2011, p. 286.

¹⁶⁵ De Beauvoir 2011 [1949], pp. 334-42. Notably, *The Second Sex* is a seminal feminist work and was a significant inspiration for the second wave.

¹⁶⁶ De Beauvoir 2011 [1949], p. 340.

absence of images of menstruation throughout the history of art is testimony to its status as taboo, or unsuitable subject matter. For some feminist artists menstruation provided an outlet for exposing this cultural void”, as maintained by Battista.¹⁶⁷ In breaking the silence and obscurity that surrounds menstruation through visual representation, feminist artists are attempting to resist menstrual taboos and reimagine menstruation as liberated from shame. Indeed, Beauvoir highlights the need for girls and women to be taught to accept oneself without shame.¹⁶⁸ This is furthered by Given who demonstrates that by openly discussing taboo subjects the “stigma-sting is taken out of them and they become a place of free discussion and exploration”, which can liberate oneself from internalised shame and provide a sense of validation.¹⁶⁹ Not only do fourth wave depictions surrounding menstruation seek to dismantle menstrual shame, they also consciously or inadvertently attempt to claim online spaces for exploration, education and discussion surrounding menstruation, which inevitably results in backlash and censorship, exposing the lack of progress since the second wave, with the added complications of the online and implications of postfeminism.

Often, feminist artists made menstruation visible whilst the body was absent. Battista asserts that examples of “practices which touch vicariously on the body, but do not feature it as directly as the visual subject of the work” demonstrate feminist artists struggling with “how to communicate the physical experiences of womanhood without necessarily depicting

¹⁶⁷ Battista 2013, p. 81.

¹⁶⁸ De Beauvoir 2011 [1949], p. 351.

¹⁶⁹ Given 2020, p. 125.

the female form”.¹⁷⁰ But, in this section I focus on artworks that explicitly depict the menstruating body, in particular Chicago’s *Red Flag* and fourth wave photographs of the experience of menstruation. By making the menstruating body explicitly visible, feminist artists are seeking to reimagine not only narratives and representations of menstruation, but also of the body. In turn they attempt to disturb the patriarchal boundaries between that which is hidden and visible, inappropriate and appropriate. They also defy the containment and regulation of women’s bodies by transgressing the idealised, objectified and fetishised completed exterior of the body, thereby interrupting the male gaze and comfort. This allows artists to destabilise the foundations on which menstrual taboos and shame are constructed. Indeed, Gill Saunders argues that women’s use of their body in art is motivated by the desire to retrieve it from the public and male domain and to present hidden aspects of the female experience, like menstruation, in order to break the “weapons of subjugation”, such as taboos and shame.¹⁷¹ Given demonstrates that shame is an “all-powerful and insidious tool of violence”, which is weaponised in order to prevent women from self-exploration and realising their power, resist bodily autonomy and silence and manipulate them.¹⁷² Therefore, artworks which actively resist this shame entrenched into women’s bodies through the depiction of the menstruating body are seeking to reimagine women’s bodies as liberated from such control. However, as I explore, such attempts by feminist artists can become reconfigured within a patriarchal framework or rendered invisible as a mode of control, thus

¹⁷⁰ Battista 2013, p. 40. Examples of this include Carole Schneemann’s *Blood Work Diary* (1972) and Judy Clark’s *Menstruation*, which was part of her exhibition *Issues* (a series-based project consisting of bodily traces) at Garage in 1973.

¹⁷¹ Saunders 1989, p. 120.

¹⁷² Given 2020, p. 159.

reinforcing the very shame that feminists seek to tackle, further highlighting the lack of progress across feminist waves.

A prominent depiction of the menstruating body is Chicago's (a key figure of the feminist art movement, who was actively engaged with the Women's Liberation Movement) *Red Flag* (fig. 27), created the year prior to *Womanhouse*, which contained another one of Chicago's menstrual works, *Menstruation Bathroom* (figs. 28-29).¹⁷³ In contrast to *Menstruation Bathroom* in which a bodily presence is only alluded to by the display of used menstrual products, an overflowing bin and open boxes of tampons and pads in an otherwise white bathroom, *Red Flag* depicts a close-up of the artist's thighs and vulva with her hand in the foreground removing a tampon. The artist's vulva is blurred and in the shadows of the predominantly black and white image, with the tampon appearing to emerge from the dark abyss. Notably, the blood on the tampon is the only part of colour within the photograph, drawing the viewer's eye. The resulting image is somewhat unsettling and disturbing. As highlighted by Camilla Mørk Røstvik, the size of the work invites close viewing, whilst the image is also clear from a distance, suggesting that viewers can view it up close or at a "safe" distance.¹⁷⁴ Chicago's gesture echoes that of Benglis and the tampon and string becomes an extension of the body, like the dildo in the *Artforum* advertisement. In fact, viewers often confused *Red Flag* with phallic imagery and it was sometimes described as a "bloody penis",

¹⁷³ *Womanhouse* was a 1972 collaborative feminist site installation and performance space created by twenty-one students from the California Institute of the Arts' Feminist Art Program, which was developed and led by Chicago and Miriam Schapiro after it moved from Fresno State College in 1971, where it had been established by Chicago in 1970. *Womanhouse* consisted of seventeen rooms and a number of performances.

¹⁷⁴ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 342.

perhaps reflecting the connections made between the tampon and phallus, which concerned religious and conservative groups and institutions, as well as women's groups, during the twentieth century.¹⁷⁵ Mørk Røstvik argues that "whether intended or not, *Red Flag* could be interpreted to both appropriate and reclaim phallic imagery of penetration, through its focus on the gendered and decidedly asexual object of the tampon".¹⁷⁶ The used tampon being pulled out of Chicago's vagina by the artist's hand somewhat de-sexualises the image, transforming what would have been a potentially pornographic image of heterosexual male fantasy into one that provocatively creates an unnerving visual experience that disturbs the male gaze. Nead conveys that during the 1970s representing aspects of female body normally hidden "demonstrates the precarious nature of cultural definitions of art and obscenity and of the permissible and the forbidden".¹⁷⁷ Notably, as explained by Mørk Røstvik, Chicago used the "high art" medium of photolithography hoping it would "lend some weight, prestige and seriousness to the topic", overcoming squeamishness, as well as resist her being dismissed as an activist.¹⁷⁸ Also, it meant that many editions could be created, increasing the possibility of it disseminating widely.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Mørk Røstvik 2019, pp. 342 and 346.

¹⁷⁶ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 342.

¹⁷⁷ Nead 1992, p. 66.

¹⁷⁸ Mørk Røstvik 2019, pp. 344 and 351.

¹⁷⁹ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 350.



Fig. 27 Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971, photolithograph printed in black and red on paper, edition of 94, 40.64 x 50.48 cm.



Fig. 28 Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom*, 1995, mixed media, reinstallation at LAMOCA of 1972 *Womanhouse* installation.



Fig. 29 Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom* (detail), 1972, mixed media, installation as part of *Womanhouse*.

Whilst the act Chicago depicts is recognisable to many people who menstruate, one which becomes mundane, the angle from which the image is taken presents an unseen perspective that even those who menstruate do not witness of their own bodies. Chicago was aware of the lack of direct representations of menstrual blood, especially from a women's point of view.¹⁸⁰ Consequently, through this depiction of a hidden act, Chicago is intervening in the invisibility of menstruation in art and wider society, including advertising. As identified by Mørk Røstvik, *Red Flag* was referred to by Chicago as her "Tampax piece" numerous times, indicating her interest in menstrual products, the experience of menstruation and the branded and corporate side of menstruation, whilst conveying the attitudes to menstruation

¹⁸⁰ Mørk Røstvik 2019, pp. 348-49.

in North America.¹⁸¹ At the time, Tampax was the best-selling tampon in the world and the majority of women in the US were using disposable products from a select few corporations, which promised to conceal menstruation and help consumers avoid blood.¹⁸² Therefore, there is an irony in Chicago depicting a blood-soaked tampon as it exits the body, revealing that which the product promises to keep secret, as suggested by Mørk Røstvik.¹⁸³ Also, “red flag” is a euphemism for menstruation and signals a warning, showing how coded language is used to further shroud menstruation in secrecy. As such, Chicago seeks to dismantle the silence surrounding menstruation by making it explicitly visible not only to people who do not menstruate but also to those who do. Chicago reveals aspects of menstruation that rarely escape the confines of the bathroom, thereby confronting viewers in a way that makes it difficult to ignore. Indeed, Borzello argues that *Red Flag* “broke the polite public denial of female bodily functions by bringing menstruation out of bathroom”.¹⁸⁴ This takes the bodily process out of obscurity, as highlighted by Frueh.¹⁸⁵

These tactics are echoed in fourth wave depictions of the menstruating body, as seen in figs. 30-31, both of which were posted to Instagram. These images can be regarded as part of an online movement of menstrual activism that has burgeoned since 2015, in which visual culture plays a central role. Similar to *Red Flag* and Yahya’s work in fig. 16, Núria Estremera’s (@nuriaestre) image shows a cropped close up of the body, through which the menstrual

¹⁸¹ Mørk Røstvik 2019, pp. 342-43.

¹⁸² Mørk Røstvik 2019, pp. 343 and 348.

¹⁸³ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 343.

¹⁸⁴ Borzello 1998, p. 186.

¹⁸⁵ Frueh 1996, p. 194.

pad is visible and a spot of blood is leaking through the layers which seek to contain it (fig. 30). Like Chicago, Estremera shows the menstrual products in use, a portrayal of menstruation that menstrual product companies rarely show. Moreover, Nead asserts that *Red Flag* pushes “boundaries of artistic propriety to their limits by challenging the aesthetic ideal of the sealed and finished female body”.¹⁸⁶ She furthers this by demonstrating that “if the tradition of the female nude emphasises the exterior of the body and the completion of its surfaces, then women’s body art reveals the interior, the terrifying secret that is hidden within this idealised exterior”.¹⁸⁷ “These images begin to reveal and invoke that anxiety-provoking interior or void... [confronting the male viewer] as the fetishised surface of the body is dissolved to reveal the traces and bodily fluids of the interior”.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, *Red Flag* and Estremera’s and Evelyn Sparks’ (@evelyn_sparks) works all transgress the boundaries and completed exterior of the idealised, fetishised and objectified female body by revealing traces of an interior bodily process that escapes its containment and regulation. Therefore, they seek to disturb the policing force of the male gaze in their refusal to accommodate male comfort or art historical tropes surrounding the female nude. Furthermore, the creation of a somewhat unsettling or unnerving viewing experience in all three images forces viewers to confront their own discomfort, to question why they are unsettled by the aestheticised depiction of a bodily process.

¹⁸⁶ Nead 1992, p. 66.

¹⁸⁷ Nead 1992, p. 66.

¹⁸⁸ Nead 1992, p. 67.



Fig. 30 Núria Estremera, 30 January 2018, photograph posted to Instagram.



evelyn_sparks Periods aren't gross

This isn't gross

If you think this is gross, or shameful, or explicit that's only because you've been conditioned to think so

The cycle of our bodies isn't gross

Men get periods

Women get periods

Other gendered people get periods

I am not ashamed of my body and it's functions

Unlearn your taboos

Work to unpack the negative beliefs you have around periods. Why do you feel that way? Who told you? Who does that belief serve?

Support the menstruating people around you by not feeding into the negative script that they are inherently shameful for bleeding or for having a vagina

Fig. 31 Evelyn Sparks (@evelyn_sparks), 20 February 2020, photograph of the artist and caption posted to Instagram.

The blood stains become part of the exterior surface in the works of Sparks and Estremera, thereby somewhat violently, due to the associations of blood, disrupting the pastel coloured, gentle and soft visual plane. Indeed, Sparks' image feels tentatively violent, which is intensified by the connotations of blood. Sparks depicts herself lying on her back on a bed with crumpled sheets, somewhat creating a state of disarray, in which the blood threatens to contaminate the white bed sheets. In many ways this image echoes a crime scene in which a victim has been found murdered or brutalised, bearing resemblances to Walter Sickert's series of works entitled *The Camden Town Murder* (c. 1907-9). This uncomfortable or disturbing voyeurism that the viewer experiences, similar to that experienced in response to *Red Flag*, is heightened by the juxtaposition between the image's softness and its tentative suggestions of violence and chaos. Nevertheless, in the current moment sharing photographs on social media is used to document the everyday, therefore perhaps circulating images of the realities menstruation on social media is somewhat inevitable, particularly in the context of this current feminist resurgence. This connection to the mundane and the everyday somewhat contradicts the allusions to violence or chaos in Sparks' image. It is apparent in the caption of the image that Sparks seeks to tackle the shame and stigma surrounding menstruation, yet perhaps she is also making menstrual blood visible to redefine the violent and masculine associations of blood and thus reimagine the ways in which blood is represented in art and culture.

However, such taboo-breaking aims of fourth wave depictions of menstruation often focus on tackling internalised shame as opposed to external patriarchal structures which enforce and inculcate such shame, like representations of body positivity and self-acceptance as I

discussed earlier. Notably, this emphasis on psychic regulation may in part be because photographs containing menstruation can be understood as a part of body positivity, as highlighted by Jessica Cwynar-Horta, due to their challenging of dominant ideals of femininity and social norms by making menstruation visible.¹⁸⁹ Indeed, in the caption to her photograph, Sparks explicitly challenges the taboo surrounding menstruation and shows how people have been conditioned to think periods are “gross”, shameful and explicit (fig. 31). But, in true fourth wave fashion, she places the emphasis on psychic regulation to “unlearn your taboos” and “unpack the negative beliefs you have around periods”. In doing so, she fails to interrogate the systems of power which sustain and perpetuate such taboos, limiting her ability to tackle such shame.

Significantly, the perspective of Sparks’ image and her pose echoes Gustave Courbet’s *L'Origine du Monde*, in which the reclined subject’s head is hidden, with the bare abdomen and parted thighs remaining visible and crumpled sheets surrounding the body (fig. 32). The visible pubic hair and vulva in Courbet’s work becomes substituted with blood-soaked underwear in Sparks’ photograph. In this sense, perhaps the blood acts as a barrier, interrupting the objectifying gaze by preventing visual access to the subject’s genitals. Yet, Sparks does not confront the gaze of the viewer and her reclined pose renders her passive and open to be consumed by the gaze.

¹⁸⁹ Cwynar-Horta 2016, pp. 37-38 and 40.

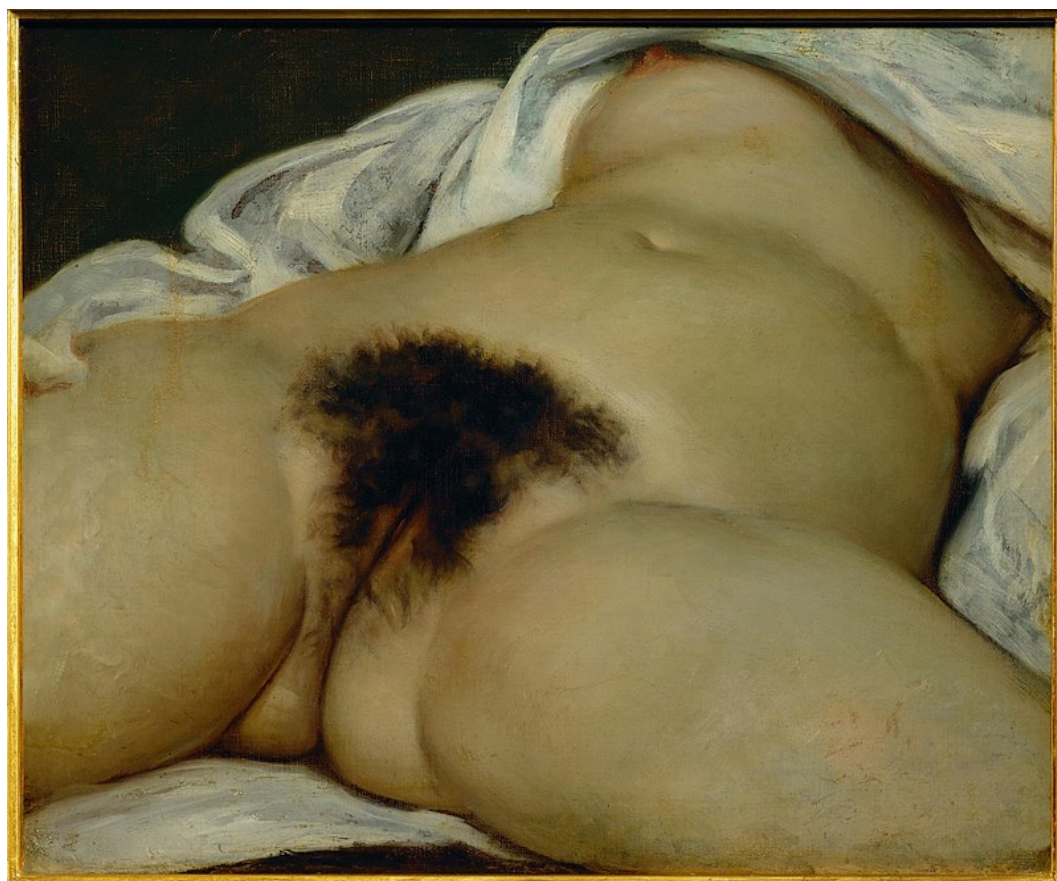


Fig. 32 Gustave Courbet, *L'Origine du monde* (*The Origin of the World*), 1866, oil on canvas, 46 x 55 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

Similarly, Indian-Canadian poet and artist Kaur's *period. 1* (fig. 33) also appears to draw on canonical female nudes, particularly Diego Velazquez's *The Rokeby Venus*, which notably has its own history with feminism as it was attacked by the suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914 (fig. 34). Kaur's *period. 1* is probably one of the most prevalent fourth wave depictions of the menstruating body on social media. The image is part of a series that was a project for Kaur's visual rhetoric course whilst she was an undergraduate student at the University of Waterloo (fig. 35). Kaur was interested in how the space in which we view art influences our consumption of it and hoped to compare reactions on different social media platforms

(Tumblr and Instagram) to a single work.¹⁹⁰ Also, she was assigned to create a project that would create conversations with imagery that would battle societal norms.¹⁹¹ For Kaur, growing up, taboos, silence and secrecy shrouded menstruation.¹⁹² Kaur also suffers from endometriosis and she was growing to hate her body, she said “a darkness came over me. I started to think, I don’t want to feel this way”.¹⁹³ With the help of her sister Prabh, the series was shot in four hours over two days, using fake blood they made from food colouring, ketchup, soy sauce and brown sugar.¹⁹⁴



Fig. 33 Rupri Kaur, *period. 1*, 2015, photograph.

¹⁹⁰ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

¹⁹¹ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

¹⁹² Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

¹⁹³ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

¹⁹⁴ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.



Fig. 34 Diego Velazquez, *The Toilet of Venus (The Rokeby Venus)*, 1647-51, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 177 cm. National Gallery, London.



Fig. 35 Rupri and Prabh Kaur, *period.*, 2015, photographic series.

The Rokeby Venus depicts a reclined Venus lying on a bed turned away from the viewer, gazing into a mirror held by Cupid. Similarly, *period. 1* depicts Kaur lying fully clothed on a bed facing away from the camera with her head resting on her arm, echoing *The Rokeby Venus*, with blood between her legs, that has also transferred onto the bed sheet, suggesting a menstrual leak. Kaur appears unaware of the presence of a camera or of her own bodily process and she does not confront the viewer's gaze, thus she is rendered passive. Kaur explains that the image was like looking into the person's world, but they do not know you are there, whilst also imagining that people could relate to it.¹⁹⁵

The ways in which Sparks' and Kaur's images, both of which are explicitly feminist in their intentions, echo canonical female nudes and art historical tropes pertaining to the depiction of the female body is notable. On one hand, it could be argued that Sparks and Kaur are utilising such tropes within the context of menstruation as an act of reclamation or rather as a way to reimagine portrayals of the female body. Nead asserts that "one of the principle goals of the female nude has been the containment and regulation of the female sexual body", in which "the forms, conventions and poses of art have worked metaphorically to shore up the female body – to seal orifices and to prevent marginal matter from transgressing the boundary dividing the inside of the body and the outside, the self from the space of the other".¹⁹⁶ In this sense, depicting the menstruating body in a way that echoes tropes of the female nude perhaps works to transgress the boundary which seals and

¹⁹⁵ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Nead 1992, p. 6.

contains the body, redefining the conventions of the female nude which traditionally enact this containment and regulation. On the other hand, perhaps these artists are reinforcing such patriarchal representations of the female body by conforming to art historical tropes, which invite a particular kind of viewing experience. Consequently, the incorporation of female nude tropes in these works somewhat undermines the activist intentions of both artists. In my view, Kaur and Sparks unconsciously drawing on such art historical tropes demonstrates the inculcation of a patriarchal visual language to the extent that feminist conceptualisations of the female body replicate this language and are tainted by it, thereby limiting their ability to be understood as an act of reclamation. Despite this, both Sparks and Kaur appear interested in the beauty of bleeding, as well as the pain and experience of it, with the ambiguity of their poses representing tranquillity or discomfort or isolation. Through this, both works resist the invisibility and silence that shrouds menstruation. Indeed, Kaur sees periods as beautiful and wanted to make peace with hers, whilst letting people into her world and starting a conversation of somewhat which affects her.¹⁹⁷

To further understand the digital landscape in which these images are shared, viewed and circulated, it is important to explore how such images are vulnerable to online censorship. Censorship on social media is an issue which negatively impacts feminist artists and activists and has a disproportionate impact on women, the LGBTQ+ community, Black women and women of colour, plus-size women and sex workers, as well as depictions of what are deemed “female” bodies, nudity and bodily fluids (particularly menstruation) and “sexually

¹⁹⁷ Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

suggestive” content.¹⁹⁸ Whilst there have been attempts to “reclaim” the content censored by Instagram, such as *Pics or it Didn’t Happen: Images Banned From Instagram* (2017), a photobook curated by Molly Soda and Arvida Byström containing more than 250 censored photographs, they have not resulted in widespread structural reform on social media platforms, demonstrating the limitations of reclaiming as a mode of feminist resistance. Censorship on social media typically entails the removal or “shadow banning” of content or accounts. “Shadow banning”, which is only vaguely referenced to as “other restrictions” in the Community Guidelines, is an insidious policy that was instituted by Facebook (who now owns Instagram) in 2019 to “limit the spread of ‘sexually suggestive’ images that do not explicitly break its guidelines”.¹⁹⁹ In other words, platforms allow users to see images from accounts they follow in their feed that are deemed “inappropriate” yet comply with the guidelines, but they will not appear in explore or hashtag pages.²⁰⁰ The ability to like and comment on an image can also be restricted. Evidently, online censorship heightens the precarity of online labour and can have a detrimental impact on an account’s reach and engagement levels and the stability of creators who rely on online communities for support and validation, the construction and maintenance of which online censorship negatively impacts.²⁰¹ Furthermore, by failing to define what is meant by “sexually suggestive”

¹⁹⁸ The disproportionate impact of online censorship on marginalised communities is demonstrated by the findings of Salty 2019 [<https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>], accessed 11 January 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Instagram [<https://www.facebook.com/help/instagram/477434105621119/>], 4 January 2021; Ables 28 May 2019 [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographers-fighting-instagram-censorship-nude-bodies>], accessed 15 April 2020.

²⁰⁰ Rosen and Lyons 10 April 2019 [<https://about.fb.com/news/2019/04/remove-reduce-inform-new-steps>], accessed 23 April 2020.

²⁰¹ This is also intensified by how no warning of removal is given nor any indication of the restrictions placed on someone’s material and sometimes content creators are not even made aware which piece of content was removed or even that a post has been removed. Paradoxically, those with a greater number of followers and

Instagram perpetuates the hyper-sexualisation, fetishisation and inappropriateness of already taboo experiences and heavily scrutinised bodies, especially Black women, queer people and plus-sized women.²⁰² As I have already argued, marginalised bodies and embodied experiences are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible. Hyper-visible to be policed, scrutinised and surveilled, but rendered invisible as a mode of control and policing.

It is important to note that censorship, especially through gendered exclusion, suppression, surveillance and policing, is an issue long faced by feminist artists and is not limited to the online sphere. Indeed, in 1973 Anita Steckel formed the Fight Censorship Group for women artists who produced sexually explicit art, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter in relation to depictions of the male nude. The group “challenged the suppression of erotic art by women [...] Yet they also responded to the broader social conditions that render men the primary agents and women the objects of both sexual and artistic authority”.²⁰³

Moreover, the creation of alternative spaces during the 1970s, such as *Womanhouse*, allowed feminist artists to evade such restrictions, exclusions and suppression. Whilst social media can facilitate the creation of alternative spaces, in which feminists carve out a corner of the platform for themselves through community-building, these spaces and communities are still situated within oppressive structures.

thus higher visibility are more vulnerable as images are more likely to be flagged for moderation, exemplifying the ambivalence towards visibility.

²⁰² Joseph 8 November 2019 [<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/nov/08/instagram-shadow-bans-marginalised-communities-queer-plus-sized-bodies-sexually-suggestive>], accessed 26 November 2020; Salty 2019 [<https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>], accessed 11 January 2021.

²⁰³ Meyer 2007, p. 382.

The removal and censorship of photographic representations of menstruation on social media is a recurring issue faced by online feminists. Consequently, attempts to achieve visibility as a form of feminist resistance are rendered obsolete by the same platforms on which such works are posted, reinforcing the shame and silence that feminist artists are seeking to tackle. When an image or account is removed, the vague reason that is typically given is that it violated Instagram's Community Guidelines (but not which aspect was violated). At the time of writing, Instagram's Community Guidelines make no explicit reference to menstruation or blood and the only areas in which blood could be inferred are references to self-injury and images of graphic violence, yet images of menstruation are removed.²⁰⁴ In Facebook's Community Standards, which provide additional guidance on the platforms' guidelines, menstruation is only mentioned in the context of "Bullying and Harassment" and fetishes in "Adult Nudity and Sexual Content".²⁰⁵ Therefore, menstruation is only discussed in relation to contexts in which it is not permitted to be shown, reproducing ideas of shame and obscenity.²⁰⁶ This exemplifies how online feminists rely on and are forced to navigate a platform which is governed by heteropatriarchal and exclusionary "Community Guidelines", resulting in the policing and intensified surveillance of female and

²⁰⁴ Instagram [<https://www.facebook.com/help/instagram/477434105621119/>], 4 January 2021. Notably, the guidelines and standards I refer to are the most recent at the time of writing. However, they are regularly altered, usually in response to widespread backlash or criticism and so may differ slightly to those that were in place when Kaur's image was removed.

²⁰⁵ Facebook [<https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/bullying>], accessed 4 January 2021; Facebook [https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/adult_nudity_sexual_activity], accessed 4 January 2021.

²⁰⁶ However, visible genitalia are permitted in the context of "health-related situations", so it is unclear why menstrual blood, even when genitalia is not shown, faces disproportionate censorship.

marginalised bodies and bodily experiences, regardless of the purpose or intentions behind the image.²⁰⁷

All of this is exemplified in the notorious online censorship of Kaur's *period*. 1. On 23 March 2015 Kaur uploaded the image to Instagram and it was removed by the platform within twenty-four hours, before which the image caused Kaur to face significant online abuse. Kaur reposted it two hours later and it was removed again within twelve hours, with Instagram claiming that the image did not follow their Community Guidelines. Kaur felt outraged and attacked and wrote on Facebook and Instagram, when resharing the censored image:

thank you Instagram for providing me with the exact response my work was created to critique [...] i [sic] will not apologize for not feeding the ego and pride of misogynist society that will have my body in underwear but not be okay with a small leak. when [sic] your pages are filled with countless photos/accounts where women (so many who are underage) are objectified. pornified. [sic] and treated less than human.²⁰⁸

Therefore, Kaur criticises the backlash her image of a natural bodily process received whilst images of the objectification, pornification and dehumanisation of women on the same

²⁰⁷ This navigation and negotiation are evident in how artists are often forced to self-censor their work and how many feminist artists on Instagram, especially those involved in self-imaging practices, are acquiring knowledge about the platform's ambiguous and contradictory censorship policies and developing practices to circumvent censorship, whilst still experiencing the omnipresent threat of censorship. Notably, censorship is also a recurring subject matter within fourth wave visual culture and modes of self-censorship and practices of circumventing censorship have developed a particular aesthetic which have become part of the online visual landscape.

²⁰⁸ Kaur 25 March 2015

[<https://www.facebook.com/rupikaurpoetry/photos/a.523823527711928.1073741828.513614775399470/821302664630678>], 2 September 2022; Kaur 25 March 2015

[https://www.instagram.com/p/OovWwJHA6f/?utm_source=ig_embed], accessed 2 September 2022. This quote is part of longer statements shared to the platforms. According to Kaur, the Facebook post was viewed three million times in less than twenty-four hours (Rao 6 May 2015)

[https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021).

platform go unchallenged and even accepted and normalised. This suggests how images which disturb male comfort and the male gaze are considered dangerous, inappropriate and in need of removal, even though *period. 1* paradoxically echoes art historical tropes of the female nude. Meanwhile, revealing images of women's bodies which conform to heterosexual male fantasies are allowed to be visible online, whilst still being subject to regulation, scrutiny, degradation, sexualisation and objectification. Indeed, the impact of postfeminist contradictions cause women online to be simultaneously positioned as agentic and empowered and granted the opportunity of visibility (only if they conform to hegemonic patriarchal ideals), whilst that visibility is used as a vehicle of heightened regulation, surveillance and policing, which can result in being rendered invisible on social media. Furthermore, the distinct lack of censoring of commodified or brandable female bodies who are favoured within an economy of visibility, despite comparable or greater levels of nudity or sexual suggestiveness to censored images, reinforces the set of criteria which dictates whose bodies and experiences are acceptable and appropriate for public consumption, whilst other bodies are rendered inappropriate, illicit and shameful through their erasure.²⁰⁹ This challenges assertions that attribute Instagram's policies to "corporate preferences that position nudity in opposition to capitalist incentives", particularly as Kaur is fully clothed in *period. 1*.²¹⁰ Instagram's Community Guidelines reinscribe the hegemonic social order through censorship, entrenching and further naturalising the appropriate versus

²⁰⁹ This is supported by Salty's findings, which found that "risqué content featuring thin, cis white women seems less censored than content featuring plus-sized, black, queer women" (2019 [<https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>], accessed 11 January 2021).

²¹⁰ Ables 28 May 2019 [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographers-fighting-instagrams-censorship-nude-bodies>], accessed 15 April 2020.

inappropriate dichotomy into content regulation.²¹¹ The menstruating body is deemed transgressive and deviant and thereby rendered invisible whilst the female body which is controllable and conducive to capitalist heteropatriarchal interests is granted visibility.

Instagram's regulations are enforced through algorithms and human moderators, therefore conscious and unconscious biases are inevitably woven into the framework of content moderation, resulting in confusing, contradictory, unjust and overreaching decisions which do not align with what the Community Guidelines explicitly state. This is supported by Kelsey Ables, who argues that "vague policies ultimately beget vague enforcement" with "continued debate on whether Instagram's goal of creating 'a safe and open environment for everyone' actually includes everyone".²¹² Notably, Kaur's image did not violate the platform's guidelines. Evidently, the guidelines provided are insufficient to overcome the biases and subjectivities of the culturally and geographically diverse (although predominantly situated in the Global South) nature of the labour involved in content moderation.²¹³ The content moderation processes of social media platforms reflect wider societal prejudices and discriminatory behaviours. They are not apolitical entities which are formed in vacuums but reflect societal attitudes towards the permissible (in)visibility of certain bodies and experiences.

²¹¹ Olszanowski 2014, pp. 84 and 88.

²¹² Ables 28 May 2019 [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographers-fighting-instagram-censorship-nude-bodies>], accessed 15 April 2020.

²¹³ Faust 2017, p. 168.

After the second time the image had been removed, Kaur posted a screenshot of the notification she received, fearing that if she posted the image for a third time her account would be deleted, with the caption “Help keep @Instagram safe from periods. Their patriarchy is leaking. Their misogyny is showing. We won’t be censored”, whilst also tagging Instagram in any pornographic images on the platform she could find.²¹⁴ All of this highlights how “the response to, and subsequent censorship of, the photo series amplified Kaur’s motive behind her work”, as demonstrated by Gretchen Faust.²¹⁵ Although Kaur’s intentions are perhaps somewhat limited by her reiteration of artistic conventions of the female nude, by sharing the image online, Kaur was able to reveal the extent to which the taboo surrounding menstruation remains ingrained in societal consciousness and systems. For many people who menstruate, Kaur’s photograph would be a recognisable and innocuous image depicting the experience of menstruation, blurring the public and the private by sharing an experience that is often shrouded in silence. But the erasure of content can render the innocuous shameful and obscene, revealing the extent to which menstruation remains embedded in shame due to its lack of visibility and representation within the public sphere.

Kaur’s posts detailing the incident gained significant traction and media attention and unsurprisingly Instagram quickly reuploaded the image on 26 March, claiming that it had been removed in error. However, the fact that the image was removed twice suggests that

²¹⁴ Kaur 25 March 2015 [https://www.instagram.com/p/0prtdPnA4w/?utm_source=ig_embed], accessed 2 September 2022; Rao 6 May 2015 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/rupi-kaur-instagram-period-photo-series_n_7213662?ri18n=true], accessed 5 August 2021.

²¹⁵ Faust 2017, p. 164.

this was less of a one-off mistake, but rather a further reflection of the extent to which menstruations remains shrouded in shame and silence. Furthermore, whilst resistance against platforms can result in content or accounts being reinstated or reforms to specific aspects of Instagram policy, as evidenced by #IWantToSeeNyome, biases and discriminations remain entrenched in the structures and systems of social media platforms. Matich, Ashman and Parsons draw into question whether patriarchal oppression can be tackled on platforms created by those enacting female oppression.²¹⁶ Certainly, although the removal of *period. 1* amplified Kaur's aims and the relevance of the series, the shame and silence surrounding menstruation is reinforced by such actions taken by social media platforms. Consequently, in turn, attempts on social media to reimagine narratives and representations of menstruation and women's bodies through processes of visibility are hindered by the very platforms on which such images are shared, where (in)visibility is weaponised as a form of policing.

Indeed, content-reporting functions allow malicious users to target certain bodies, such as a fat-shaming accounts which boast about flagging body positive accounts or people who seek to have sex workers removed.²¹⁷ Salty's investigation into content policing on Instagram found that "policies [that] are meant to protect users from racist or sexist behaviour are harming the very groups that need protection. For example, people who come under attack for their identity have been reported or banned instead of the attacker", as evidenced by the disabling of a feminist account after it was targeted by Men's Rights Activists.²¹⁸ In light of

²¹⁶ Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2018, p. 357.

²¹⁷ Ables 28 May 2019 [<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photographers-fighting-instagrams-censorship-nude-bodies>], accessed 15 April 2020.

²¹⁸ Salty 2019 [<https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>], accessed 11 January 2021.

the lack of action taken by social media platforms to sufficiently tackle increasing levels of online abuse and harassment, even when it is reported by victims, the disproportionate censorship of the most targeted groups solidifies the sentiment that these groups are not welcome or safe on social media, particularly in a highly visible capacity.

All of this contradicts the supposed democratic and utopian ideals of social media. Instagram should make the representation and expression of diverse experiences easier and more accessible, yet it enforces guidelines which actively work against democratisation and inclusivity. In turn, social media gives the illusion of freedom of expression, yet the platforms determine who has that freedom. Instagram's Community Guidelines claim "we want Instagram to continue to be an authentic and safe place for inspiration and expression. Help us foster this community" and that they seek to protect this community and create a "safe and open environment for everyone".²¹⁹ But who are they protecting? Whose safety is prioritised?²²⁰ How is this community constituted when marginalised communities are policed? As highlighted by Salty "there are invisible digital forces that prioritise the safety and voices of certain people over others".²²¹ Sarah T. Roberts argues that for those who occupy the margins of social space, censorship may seem part of the negotiated cost of using Instagram for (self-)expression, but when identity markers serve as deletion fodder, the implications of censorship become even more personal, which she suggests is a trade-off

²¹⁹ Instagram [<https://www.facebook.com/help/instagram/477434105621119/>], 4 January 2021.

²²⁰ The invisible labour of Instagram's content moderators, who screen content after it has been reported for violating the Community Guidelines, is traumatic, emotionally-taxing, outsourced and low paid, involving rapidly evaluating often explicit, violent and graphic imagery in order to keep the platform "safe", thus further bringing into question whose safety is being protected, as suggested by Byström and Soda (2016, p. 16).

²²¹ Salty 2019 [<https://saltyworld.net/algorithmicbiasreport-2/>], accessed 11 January 2021.

that underscores the very nature of Instagram itself.²²² However, Faust profoundly asks “if particular imagery of bodies are silenced or censored in a place of boundless possibility, then is there any place to be free?”²²³ Social media simultaneously enables users to self-express, raise consciousness and voice structural critique while retaining the power to render expression, dissent and resistance invisible.

Social media censorship reinforces and intensifies the already heightened surveillance of women from social media and digital technologies. Gill explains that “digital and media cultures and postfeminist modalities of subjecthood are coming together to produce a novel and extraordinarily powerful regulatory gaze on women”.²²⁴ Social media censorship is a clear example of this “powerful regulatory gaze”, rendering women powerless, silenced and invisible if they repudiate heteropatriarchal expectations of what is deemed as acceptable and appropriate. Indeed, Banet-Weiser asserts that the “culture of surveillance [...] often marshals shaming as a disciplinary device”.²²⁵ Therefore, surveillance is a form of control. Social media censorship is not a few one-off algorithmic errors, but rather it is a reflection and extension of the ways in which the visibility of female and marginalised bodies and experiences, especially on social media, is used to enact surveillance, shaming, regulation and silencing. Consequently, this hinders the ability of feminist artists to employ visibility to enact transformative processes that challenge patriarchal boundaries and frameworks, such as redefining or reimagining, when oppressive norms are entrenched into the very systems

²²² Roberts 2016, p. 20.

²²³ Faust 2017, p. 163.

²²⁴ Gill 2019, p. 148.

²²⁵ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 81.

and structures within which feminists are operating. Overall, this highlights the precarity and vulnerability of visibility on social media and the limitations of using visibility as a mode of activism, as the end in and of itself, rather than as an initial step forward within collective politics to disrupt the oppressive structures which render bodily experiences shameful and taboo.

The censorship of and reaction to Kaur's image further shows how fourth wave artists are continuing the work of second wave figures like Chicago by making the menstruating body explicitly visible to resist shaming and silencing, as well as how there is still much work left to do. Social media should give a platform and space for these kinds of works to be displayed, but, in reality, this is vulnerable and volatile. As suggested by Mørk Røstvik, many menstrual artworks in the 2010s faced the "double-edged sword of menstrual art", both censored and celebrated, used to show progress by the menstrual product industry, whilst being attacked on social media.²²⁶ Notably, unlike other menstrual art of the 1970s, *Red Flag* continues to receive mainstream attention, becoming a key image in the visual history of menstruation.²²⁷ Nevertheless, like other canonised works, "as it grows in power and reach, it threatens to eclipse other images, thus elevating only one version of menstruation and one sole genius", as suggested by Mørk Røstvik.²²⁸ Nevertheless, this history and legacy is important to contemporary menstrual activism. Indeed, Mørk Røstvik maintains that "for menstrual activists and artists, the existence of over forty years of menstrual art history lends gravity to

²²⁶ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 352.

²²⁷ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 350.

²²⁸ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 350.

their cause, as well as an alternative visual history to dominant advertising tropes”.²²⁹

Therefore, even though *Red Flag* is not explicitly referenced, such continuities and convergences need to be examined to further understand the importance of fourth wave feminist menstrual art and the current position of menstrual activism. Despite the canonisation of *Red Flag*, there are some significant differences and discontinuities between Chicago’s work and the fourth wave images I discussed that are equally necessary to consider. Chicago focussed on the corporate side of menstruation, as well as issues surrounding art and image making and societal taboos, whereas fourth wave artists in some ways focussed more on internalised shame. Moreover, the fourth wave images show the beauty and pain of bleeding, whilst Chicago presents an unseen perspective of the menstruating body and menstrual products that is truncated and distorted. Nevertheless, all of the works explore the experience of menstruation and are somewhat unsettling in their reimagining of the portrayal of menstruation and women’s bodies.

5.8 Conclusion

Problematising the attribution of the notion of “reclaiming” to feminist depictions of the body allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the use of the female body in feminist art that extends beyond outright condemnation or reductive celebration. Indeed, feminist depictions of the body, especially the female nude, cannot be fully (re)claimed from patriarchal conventions, expectations and structures in the current moment. Battista asks:

With the female body so loaded with meaning and the weight of history, how does an artist find her way out? The answer is she doesn’t. It would be unreasonable for

²²⁹ Mørk Røstvik 2019, p. 350.

the artist to assume that an audience can cast off the tradition of female imagery in the same way that one cannot remove desire from the gaze?²³⁰

This is furthered by Saunders who asserts that literal figuration has been contaminated by patriarchal conventions beyond retrieval.²³¹ In relation to the fourth wave, this is in many ways due to the coexistence and intertwining of the fourth wave with postfeminist conditions, which significantly informs both its visual culture and how these works are viewed and received, especially on social media. Indeed, Matich, Ashman and Parsons argue that “images of the defiant, radical female body online or in the media are all too rapidly reconfigured to align with traditional patriarchal schema”.²³² Furthermore, social media has the potential to render intentions behind an artwork or image, regardless of how defiant or radical, powerless. Consequently, images of the female nude can become detached from their feminist motives and consumed and circulated within a heteropatriarchal framework due to the infinite uncontrollable gaze on social media and the inability of creators to control the trajectory of an image once it has been posted. Therefore, whilst feminist artists can attempt to resist and defy patriarchal idealisations and objectification, they can never be completely detached from or untainted by these systems. Due to the unhelpfulness of the question of reclamation in framing feminist depictions of the body, I maintain it is more valuable to explore such works in relation to notions of reimagining, reworking and redefining and the construction of counter-hegemonic narratives, representations and conceptualisations.

²³⁰ Battista 2013, p. 63.

²³¹ Saunders 1989, p. 132.

²³² Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2018, p. 354.

Nead contends that “for feminists to reclaim the female body means to challenge the authority of patriarchal boundaries – boundaries of gender and identity, between art and obscenity, the permissible and the forbidden”, which should not be a definitive redrawing of lines in stone regarding the representation of the female body but rather open the space of those drawing lines and framing definitions.²³³ However, in my opinion, this links more closely to active processes of reimagining, redefining and reworking, rather than reclaiming which suggests something more linear, fixed and definitive. Indeed, such transformative and reactive processes that I have highlighted help to transgress and destabilise patriarchal boundaries, whereas reclaiming does not necessarily allow for the creation of new meanings, thus patriarchal associations endure during reclamation efforts. This is supported by Nead who advocates that:

The female body is dense with meaning in patriarchal culture and these connotations cannot be shaken off entirely. There is no possibility of recovering the female body as a neutral sign for feminist meanings, but signs and values can be transformed and different identities can be set in place.²³⁴

She reiterates this further on by maintaining “the image of the female body may never be free of contradiction but patriarchal traditions of representation can be sufficiently disturbed to create new and different associations and values”.²³⁵ Exploring the creation of new narratives and conceptualisations and the destabilisation of patriarchal boundaries through processes like redefining, reimagining and reworking accounts for the reactive, non-linear, ongoing and transformative practices evident in fourth wave visual culture. Also, they allow for a consideration of the discontinuities and continuities that exist between feminist

²³³ Nead 1992, pp. 107-08.

²³⁴ Nead 1992, p. 72.

²³⁵ Nead 1992, p. 75.

waves and the ways in which fourth wave feminists are employing and reworking second wave tactics and discourses in response to the current moment.

But the fourth wave's utilisation of visibility to enact such practices is in many ways limited, reductive and problematic despite its productive potentials. Indeed, visibility is inherently exclusionary. If someone or something is visible, someone or something else must be rendered less visible and obscured (although this could be further complicated through a consideration of those who do not want to be visible). Therefore, it is important to reiterate that marginalised bodies are often excluded from such efforts or only included as an empty signifier or token, in which their intersectional experiences are coalesced, hidden or entirely neglected. Furthermore, (in)visibility can be weaponised as a mechanism of surveillance, scrutiny, shaming, policing and objectification. Visibility does not guarantee inclusion, intersectional representation, influence or reclamation, especially in the digital age. Finally, the fourth wave's unwavering prioritisation of and reliance on visibility narrowly treads the line between politics of visibility and an economy of visibility, in which it is often unclear as to whether visibility is a vital first step towards the dismantling of oppressive structures or visibility is the end goal. This is particularly evident when one considers the relationship between and inextricable intertwining of contemporary feminisms and individualism, neoliberalism and postfeminism in the digital age. Consequently, additional consideration of how and why hyper-visibility of the female body is being sought after is necessary to further examine the state of precarity in fourth wave visual culture between economies of visibility and politics of visibility.

CHAPTER FIVE: (UN)FUNNY FEMINISTS: THE SUBVERSION OF MISOGYNY AND ANTI-FEMINISM IN THE CONTEXT OF DIGITAL NETWORKED TECHNOLOGIES

6.1 Introduction

This chapter centres on the subversion of misogynistic or anti-feminist images, rhetoric and conventions by feminists, in which such entities are transformed into works that are explicitly feminist in their purpose. This largely operates through the (re)appropriation of a pre-existing entity, where the original meaning is distorted and thus disrupted, through visual, curatorial and/or linguistic means, to the extent that it serves a fourth wave feminist agenda. Consequently, I draw on the idea of culture jamming as a form of subversive (re)appropriation, which relates to parody, satire, détournement and disruption. Inevitably, these practices can be a vehicle for humour and shared (networked) feminist laughter. Therefore, I explore the multiplicity of feminist humour and the ways in which feminist artists not only challenge but also embrace and reconfigure negative stereotypes of feminists, such as the humourless feminist.¹ Also, Sara Ahmed's figure of the "feminist killjoy" is echoed, of which I highlight the affective potentialities.² All of this further exemplifies the reactive and reactionary nature of fourth wave feminism and the contemporary battleground between feminisms and anti-feminisms, both of which are hyper-visible on social media, as outlined in chapter two. Also, once such content is placed

¹ The forms of feminist humour I discuss in this chapter, such as sarcasm, irony, parody and satire, are connected as all of them are subversive, create shared laughter and reveal absurdity. Therefore, I do not treat them as separate and distinct, but rather as overlapping and entangled.

² Ahmed first introduced the figure of the feminist killjoy in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), before developing it further in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and she also has a research blog entitled *feminist killjoys*. Ahmed argues that the figure of the feminist killjoy "'spoils' the happiness of others; she is a spoilsport because she refuses to convene, to assemble, or to meet up over happiness" (Ahmed 2010, p. 65). Furthermore, she "kills joy because of what she claims exists", thus it is because of what she reveals that she becomes a feminist killjoy (Ahmed 2017, pp. 252 and 256).

into the online sphere, its form, meaning and intention can continuously and infinitely be altered, reappropriated and subverted, indicating the contextual instability of this material. However, my intergenerational comparative analyses will provide some grounding and enable me to challenge assertions that humour and such subversive and supposedly digital networked practices outlined above are a defining mark of and confined to fourth wave feminism by showing their continued use across feminist waves. In turn, this allows me to consider the impact Web 2.0 has on such tactics.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore the various positions and purposes of humour and shared laughter within fourth wave feminism, particularly in relation to social media and anti-feminist rhetoric, as well as some of their problems and criticisms. In my first set of comparative analyses, I explore Rape Crisis Scotland's *10 Top Tips to End Rape* (2012) in comparison with Ilona Granet's *Emily Post Street Signs* (1986-89) and the Guerrilla Girls' *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* (1988) which was subsequently adapted by Ridykeulous to create *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* (2006) during the third wave. By considering continuities across feminist waves, these case studies will allow me to further analyse the impact that digital networked technologies have on practices of subversion, as well as explore their implications in relation to notions of feminist community and connectivity. In my second set of comparative analyses, I analyse how Bell's exhibition *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics* (2017) subverts online sexual harassment by, somewhat humorously, (re)appropriating unsolicited images of penises. To explore the use of alternative spaces as a subversive device and the relationship between the domestic and subversion within feminist art, I compare *I Didn't Ask For This* with *Womanhouse* (1972) and

I discuss how Bell's exhibition exemplifies the blurring of the online, offline, public, personal, political and private within fourth wave feminism. Finally, to consider the ways in which Bell inverts and complicates art historical nude and gaze tropes and conventions, I compare the exhibition to depictions of the male nude from the 1970s, such as Linda Nochlin's *Achetez des Bananes* (1972) and works by Sylvia Sleigh (1970s). These intergenerational comparative analyses allow me to further explore the consistencies, connections and (dis)continuities across feminist waves in relation to feminist humour and subversion, further challenging the oppositional framing of the relationship between the second and fourth waves. They also enable me to further critique the perception that the fourth wave exists and operates solely online, whilst also considering the significant impact of digital networked technologies. Furthermore, I have chosen to focus on *10 Top Tips* and *I Didn't Ask For This* as they both centre on subverting misogynistic and anti-feminist acts and conventions through (re)appropriation and disruption in order to expose the absurdity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of misogyny, especially issues surrounding rape culture.³

³ The term "rape culture" was coined during the second wave and its first published use seems to be in *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women*, edited by Noreen Connell and Cassandra Wilson for the New York Radical Feminists (1974). But the term came into widespread usage and mainstream discourse at the beginning of the fourth wave. Therefore, Rentschler describes it as a "cross-generational feminist concept" (Rentschler 2014, p. 67). Keller, Mendes and Ringrose argue that the re-emergence of rape culture in public discourse is in part due to the growth of feminist online activity, with it having a pedagogical function and raising awareness (Keller, Mendes and Ringrose 2018, p. 24). Gay, whose seminal 2014 intersectional feminist book entitled *Bad Feminist* was fundamental in informing Bell's feminism and the fourth wave, defines "rape culture" as a culture inundated by the idea that "male aggression and violence toward women is acceptable and often inevitable", thus encompassing of broad spectrum of practices and acts ranging "in terms of legality, prevalence and cultural acceptance" from sexual assault to victim-blaming to street harassment to "lad banter" (Gay 2014, p.129; Keller, Mendes and Ringrose 2018, p. 24).

6.2 The Multiplicity of Humour Within Fourth Wave Feminism

Kira Cochrane identifies that many feminist activists she interviewed perceive humour to be one of the defining marks of fourth wave feminism, which Cochrane sees as a potentially controversial idea.⁴ Humour is not a new tactic within feminism, as I demonstrate through my comparative analyses in this chapter. Sundén and Paasonen highlight that “feminist and other political movements have long used humour, laughter and parody as forms of resistance and even subversion in coping with or providing relief from oppression and violence”.⁵ To assert that humour is distinctive to or a defining feature of the fourth wave furthers an oppositional approach to feminist waves in which second wave feminists are negatively stereotyped as humourless and strident. Furthering this, it can be argued that online feminists utilise humour, such as satire or irony, to tackle negative stereotypes of feminists, portray feminism in a less serious light and challenge anti-feminist rhetoric, wilful misunderstandings and misconceptions.⁶ In this sense, the use of humour is perhaps somewhat a reactive or defensive strategy. This is also evidently intertwined with the notion of “reclaiming” or “rebranding” feminism discussed in the previous chapter.

Consequently, due to the stereotypes of feminists being humourless, the use of humour within feminism can also be seen as compliant, as suggested by Cochrane, as a way to attempt to engage in feminist debate but avoid anti-feminist critique.⁷ This is furthered by Banet-Weiser who shows that the kind of feminist discourses and practices which circulate

⁴ Cochrane 2013, p. 145.

⁵ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 45.

⁶ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 12; Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, pp. 213 and 215.

⁷ Cochrane 2013, pp. 146-47.

easily within an economy of visibility are often soft and humorous as opposed to enraged and angry because they need to be framed in a way that is palatable to a non-feminist public.⁸ Moreover, attempts to counteract negative stereotypes of feminists through humour can inadvertently reinforce and reproduce feminine ideals and expectations, such as being nice, likeable, palatable and unthreatening.⁹ Indeed, Rivers maintains that there is an “increasing trend for feminism to be rendered safe or non-threatening by a reliance on self-deprecation or humour”.¹⁰

The use of humour within feminism can also be seen as “acquiescence, or complacency, clearly unmatched to” the serious or traumatic nature of the issues involved in feminist activism.¹¹ For example, Banet-Weiser contends that, whilst humour can be used effectively as critique, its use in popular feminism, especially online, can result in the distillation of politics in which content is used ironically to create critique which is more palatable.¹² Therefore, the use of humour is indicative of how an economy of visibility functions, in which visibility is regarded as sufficient in and of itself rather than a route to politics, where the joke too often stays a joke, existing for a brief time before dissipating.¹³ Consequently, there is division between proponents of the use of humour within feminism and those who believe that humour is not an effective tactic and that rational critical dialogue is required, as identified by Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift.¹⁴ However, I argue that the two

⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 140-41.

⁹ Cochrane 2013, p. 147.

¹⁰ Rivers 2017, p. 70.

¹¹ Cochrane 2013, p. 146.

¹² Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 140.

¹³ Banet-Weiser 2018, p. 140.

¹⁴ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 349.

are not mutually exclusive and humour can be a useful vehicle in forging uncomfortable discussions and tackling difficult topics, as supported by Cochrane.¹⁵

As I demonstrate in this chapter, humorous responses to rape culture and misogyny can sit alongside emotionally heavy acts of speaking out and these practices can be mutually sustaining and beneficial. Indeed, Sundén and Paasonen assert that “humour may provide a breathing space of sorts where the pressing heaviness of sexual harassment and abuse of power become momentarily lighter to bear”.¹⁶ Cochrane maintains that feminists should not have to be humorous or flippant when it comes to sexism and humour should never be compulsory, nor have to fulfil feminine expectations, but, it can be a “vehicle for political ideas and campaigning, as well as for rage”.¹⁷ Furthermore, humour can fulfil necessary survivalist functions within political movements, as I discuss in more detail further on. As highlighted by Sundén and Paasonen, constant anger is exhausting, where as “laughter facilitates affective release that energises bodies by increasing their capacities to act”.¹⁸ Humour does not have to be compliant, flippant and unthreatening, but it can be used in ways that are interrogative, subversive, counter-hegemonic, disruptive and of significant political importance. Moreover, the intertwining of humour and social media platforms allows for the galvanisation of new audiences, debates and discussions as well as fulfilling a community-building function by forging “in-joke recognition and connection”.¹⁹ This is

¹⁵ Cochrane 2013, p. 149.

¹⁶ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 45.

¹⁷ Cochrane 2013, p. 147.

¹⁸ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 65-66.

¹⁹ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 230; Rentschler and Thrift 2015, pp. 338-39. This latter point is also echoed in Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 225.

furthered by Jo Anna Isaak who maintains that laughter is not private or depoliticised, but a communal response which demonstrates solidarity and recognition of shared repression between viewer and artist.²⁰

Therefore, shared, especially digitally networked, laughter has a mobilising and galvanising potential. This idea is furthered by Sujata Moorti who explains that humour and satire can be used on social media to provoke anger and mobilise renewed interest in achieving feminist goals.²¹ Humour is an effective tool for providing education and encouraging political action that extends beyond the online and the humorous, which indicates a collective recognition that humour is not sufficient in and of itself but a valuable tactic for mobilisation. In addition to this, exposing younger or newfound feminists to popular interpretations of feminist analysis can help to heighten their media literacy and political awareness.²² Cochrane explains that Bates, the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, sees humour as way of building strong and popular movement by attracting those alienated by academic or theoretical (in other words, humourless) forms of feminism.²³ Cochrane furthers this by highlighting that “women are encountering feminism in a whole range of guises, far beyond the academy, coming for the jokes and staying for the politics”.²⁴ However, although humour can be an effective mobilising tactic, the perception that humour needs to be employed in order to market feminism to those alienated by

²⁰ Isaak 1996, p. 5.

²¹ Moorti 2018, p. 111.

²² Marghitu and Moore Johnson 2018, pp. 184-85.

²³ Cochrane 2013, pp. 148-49.

²⁴ Cochrane 2013, p. 154.

humourless forms of feminism reinforces negative stereotypes of feminists and further suggests that feminism is in need of “rebranding”. Evidently, humour within feminism is not monolithic, much like the movement itself and it does not function in one singular way. As such, it can be used in different ways and for numerous purposes within a multitude of contexts.

Whilst humorous subversive practices are not distinctive to the fourth wave, the effect of digital networked technologies on such modes of feminist activism should not be understated, which in turn impacts the discourses and praxis of the movement. The immediacy and reactionary nature of social media allows for the creation, dissemination and consumption of visual culture at unprecedented rates and with significant levels of ease. It also garners participation by encouraging likes, follows, comments and shares as well as the creation and adaptation of visual responses, thereby forging a growing participatory network. In particular, online humour incorporates a call and response between the original creator and audiences, extending consciousness-raising and engagement beyond the initial work. Moreover, the immediacy of social media allows for the intervention into live and unravelling political events and debates, in which the transmission of misogynistic messaging can be “called out”, disrupted and diverted. As such, the use of humour online can be a powerful activist tactic in challenging and disrupting hegemonic narratives, allowing feminists to both play into and counter negative stereotypes. This is further supported by

Emilie Lawrence and Jessica Ringrose who argue that the production and distribution of humour online can question entrenched stereotypes and challenge patriarchal structures.²⁵

Cochrane contends that sometimes the absurdity of misogyny means that humour often seems the only possible response.²⁶ Indeed, one of the most effective ways in which fourth wave feminists employ humour, as a vehicle to demonstrate the absurdity, pervasiveness and ubiquity of misogyny, is through subversive practices, such as culture jamming or inversion. Significantly, by exposing their absurdity norms can be destabilised.²⁷ This is furthered by Isaak who maintains that laughter is a “metaphor for transformation, for thinking about cultural change”.²⁸ Overall, in the context of online spaces, there is evidently a coexistence and collision of multiple forms of humour, which are used for numerous different purposes, that oftentimes compete for visibility and virality. This is supported by Lawrence and Ringrose who highlight that there is a wide “complex, shifting and sometimes ambivalent assemblage of social media feminist humour”.²⁹

Isaak demonstrates that contemporary female artists utilise laughter or *jouissance* in transformative, disruptive and interrogative ways as a “catalyst that could enable a break or subversion in the established representational and social structure”, in which there is a sense of play in the “joy of disrupting” or going the beyond the established or fixed meaning,

²⁵ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 214.

²⁶ Cochrane 2013, pp. 147-48.

²⁷ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 224.

²⁸ Isaak 1996, p. 5.

²⁹ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 222.

which remains prominent within fourth wave visual culture.³⁰ Culture jamming is one of the most prevalent ways that meaning is subverted and disrupted through visual and linguistic means, which is defined as “the subversion of advertising and other mass-media output (by parody, alteration, etc.) as a form of protest against consumerism, corporate culture, and the power of the media”.³¹ To jam suggests an act which is disruptive and interfering, creating a form of blockage. Whilst it can be traced to the early beginnings of corporate capitalism and popular mass media culture, its new reincarnation can be related to the increase of globalisation and rise of digital media and network technologies which provide the tools and material necessary for such strategies.³² Within this context this operates through the use of “satirical acts of feminist detournement”, where pre-existing fragments are reused and repurposed to subvert dominant meaning in order to give new critical feminist meaning through visual and textual means, which Rentschler and Thrift refer to as “feminist culture jamming”.³³ This can disrupt mainstream and dominant cultural and political narratives using “crowdsourced creativity and playfulness”, which is able to turn elements of popular culture into a vehicle for social change, shifting the public’s role from passive consumers to active creators and contributors.³⁴

³⁰ Isaak 1996, pp. 3 and 15.

³¹ Oxford English Dictionary
[<https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/45746?redirectedFrom=culture+jamming#eid117521040>], accessed 17 January 2020.

³² Kuni 2012, p. 99.

³³ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 332. Christine Harold highlights that “detournement can be translated as ‘detour’ or ‘diversion’ but other, more subtle meanings in the French include ‘hijacking,’ ‘embezzlement,’ ‘corruption,’ and ‘misappropriation’” (Harold 2004, p. 192).

³⁴ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 13.

One of the ways in which humour, laughter and culture jamming are most visibly utilised in the online feminist space is through memes, which, like humour, have numerous functions, typically combining an image with humorous bold text. An early example of this is the viral meme response to Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's gaffe during a televised presidential debate on 16 October 2012, where he used the phrase "binders full of women", eliciting countless GIFs (Graphics Interchange Format), memes and folders for sale on Amazon.³⁵ By "cloaking feminist grievances in humour that draws from the coffers of celebrity culture, these memes bridge the gap between feminist counter-narratives and mainstream culture, while at the same time disrupting the trope of the humourless feminist", as maintained by Rentschler and Thrift, which, as I have already discussed, has a mobilising and galvanising potential, but is not without its problems.³⁶ Overall, a networked response is created and intervenes in the current political debate and a feminist network and "connective action" is formed through *ad hoc* community-building and shared laughter, in which memes can be used to reference a "shared feminist literacy".³⁷ As such, feminist memes can forge *ad hoc* public feminist spaces on non-feminist and apolitical sites and platforms, thus claiming spaces as feminist and for feminist critique, consciousness-raising and connection.³⁸ Moreover, the creation of memes shows agency in repurposing and transforming media content.³⁹ This engenders a snowball effect where the connection that

³⁵ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 330. He used the phrase in response to a question on gender equality in the workplace to suggest that he received folders of resumes of female applicants when he was Governor of Massachusetts.

³⁶ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 347.

³⁷ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, pp. 331 and 340; Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 225.

³⁸ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, pp. 329 and 332.

³⁹ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 341.

the content creates leads to more content being produced.⁴⁰ In turn, this influences the content and tactics of other forms of fourth wave visual culture and political practices that operate beyond the confines of the networked response and online spaces, such as memes and online humour being referenced in placards at offline protests. All of this further demonstrates how the use of feminist humour on social media, particularly within digital visual production, can fulfil a number of different political and activist functions. Now, I turn my attention to my case studies to consider the multiplicity, complexities and ambivalences of humour and subversive tactics across feminist waves by focussing on the visual, as well as further exploring the impact that digital networked technologies have on such practices.

6.3 Inverting and Culture Jamming Victim-Blaming Rhetoric in Rape Crisis Scotland's *10 Top Tips to End Rape* and the Impact of Digital Networked Technologies

In this section I compare Rape Crisis Scotland's 2012 campaign *10 Top Tips to End Rape* with Ilona Granet's *Emily Post Street Signs*, which have both received little academic attention, to demonstrate how the inversion of victim-blaming rhetoric and use of culture jamming is not distinctive to the fourth wave or online forms of contemporary feminism. I then go on to compare *10 Top Tips* with the Guerrilla Girls' *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* which was subsequently adapted by Ridykeulous to create *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* during the third wave. These examples utilise textual humour, irony and subversion (all of which are identifiable elements of the Guerrilla Girls' body of work) to expose the inequalities, sexism and gendered double standards within the artworld, in the case of *The*

⁴⁰ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 215.

Advantages of Being a Woman Artist, and the absurdity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of rape culture and victim-blaming in regard to *10 Top Tips*. *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* also highlights the existence of feminist (re)appropriation prior to Web 2.0, as well as its implications relating to notions of feminist community and connectivity. Nevertheless, these practices are now facilitated and made easier through digital networked technologies, as evidenced by my mapping of the biography of *10 Top Tips*. Indeed, by utilising these comparative analyses I can further demonstrate how such tactics are not distinct to the fourth wave, as well as more fully explore the impact that digital networked technologies have on subversive practices, such as inversion, culture jamming and satire. Whilst the works I compare with *10 Top Tips* are from the 1980s and thus slightly later than the majority of other works I incorporate into my comparative analyses throughout this thesis and so have a different context, it is important to consider works from the latter part of what is understood as the second wave. Moreover, these works are indebted to the work of 1970s women artists and exemplify continuities across feminist temporalities, as well as how the context of the 1980s with an intense “backlash” against feminism and heightened negative feminist stereotypes echoes the battleground of the contemporary moment, as outlined in chapter two.⁴¹

In contrast to “no means no” rape prevention campaigns (a slogan coined in the 1970s), *10 Top Tips* is a humorous and subversive poster and postcard campaign, created by Rape Crisis Scotland (fig. 36). Rape Crisis Scotland (RCS) is an organisation working to raise awareness of

⁴¹ Faludi 1993.

the prevalence and impact of sexual violence, transform the attitudes that underpin it, improve responses, ensure survivors can access support and ultimately end sexual violence.⁴² In this particular campaign they “adapted an apt and popular revision of the traditional approach to rape prevention”, aiming to “reverse the popular trend of focusing rape prevention messages on women and instead transfer these towards more appropriate recipients – potential perpetrators”, as explained on the organisation’s website.⁴³ For example, the poster reads “Carry a whistle! If you are worried you might assault someone ‘by accident’ you can hand it to the person you are with, so they can call for help”. Indeed, Rentschler argues that “while presented jokingly, the campaign nonetheless models how to make potential rapists responsible for their behaviour”.⁴⁴

⁴² Rape Crisis Scotland [<https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/about-what/>], accessed 27 May 2021.

⁴³ Rape Crisis Scotland [<https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/campaigns-top-tips/>], accessed 21 May 2021.

⁴⁴ Rentschler 2015, p. 354.



STOP RAPE

© Rodchenko & Stepanova Archive, DACS, RAO, 2011

10 Top Tips to End Rape

- 1 Don't put drugs in women's drinks.
- 2 When you see a woman walking by herself, leave her alone.
- 3 If you pull over to help a woman whose car has broken down, remember not to rape her.
- 4 If you are in a lift and a woman gets in, don't rape her.
- 5 Never creep into a woman's home through an unlocked door or window, or spring out at her from between parked cars, or rape her.
- 6 **USE THE BUDDY SYSTEM!**
If you are not able to stop yourself from assaulting people, ask a friend to stay with you while you are in public.
- 7 Don't forget: it's not sex with someone who's asleep or unconscious – it's **RAPE!**
- 8 Carry a whistle! If you are worried you might assault someone 'by accident' you can hand it to the person you are with, so they can call for help.
- 9 Don't forget: Honesty is the best policy. If you have every intention of having sex later on with the woman you're dating regardless of how she feels about it, tell her directly that there is every chance you will rape her. If you don't communicate your intentions, she may take it as a sign that you do not plan to rape her and inadvertently feel safe.
- 10 Don't rape.

Looking for information and ideas on how to campaign against rape?
Check out the following websites: www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk
www.notever.co.uk

Fig. 36 Rape Crisis Scotland, *10 Top Tips to End Rape*, 2012, poster and postcard campaign.

According to Rentschler, the campaign was created in 2012, although no date is given on the RCS website.⁴⁵ Seemingly this campaign was based on a 2011 blog post by Leigh Hofheimer listing ten tips targeted at potential perpetrators, created by her co-worker who was inspired by rape prevention tip websites.⁴⁶ Hofheimer's tips also gained significant traction in 2015, when comedian Sarah Silverman tweeted the exact same list from the blog post, with the suggestion to "send to all the men in ur [*sic*] life", which unsurprisingly caused backlash, with some men calling it misandrist and unfair and offensive.⁴⁷ However, this demonstrates what Rentschler describes as a "proliferation of online feminist responses to rape culture that use humour to great mobilising effect".⁴⁸ Since then, similar subversive counter-narratives aiming to shift the focus, accountability and blame onto perpetrators instead of victims have repeatedly resurfaced on social media, most notably following the kidnap and murder of Sarah Everard by a male police officer in March 2021. This complex biography epitomises the difficulties of dealing with networked feminist content. Indeed, "social media resembles an overlapping ecosystem more than a series of individual spaces, which is reflected in the way that users create, disseminate and comment on content", as highlighted by Alice E. Marwick.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, its adaptation, (re)circulation and dissemination across different platforms is part of its effectiveness. The ways in which such content, formats and strategies are networked, adapted and (re)circulated allow them to

⁴⁵ Rentschler 2015, p. 354.

⁴⁶ Hofheimer 2011 [<https://canyourelate.org/2011/05/24/rape-prevention-tips/>], accessed 21 May 2021. Notably, RCS' *10 Top Tips* bears a striking resemblance to Hofheimer's list, with eight out of ten of the tips in the RCS campaign either word for word identical or suggesting the same strategy as the original blog post, thus only two of the ten tips are different.

⁴⁷ Bennett-Smith 23 March 2015 [<https://qz.com/368240/sarah-silvermans-rape-tips-for-men-really-annoyed-a-lot-of-men/>], accessed 24 May 2021.

⁴⁸ Rentschler 2014, p. 69.

⁴⁹ Marwick 2019, p. 319.

resurface on social media at different points, when the public conversation is once again focused on male sexual violence against women and girls. This is furthered by Marwick who, in building upon danah boyd's four common characteristics of user generated content, argues that "content created by individuals is replicable as it can be easily copied and spread; it is scalable because it can be potentially seen by millions; it is persistent since it leaves digital footprints in archives and search engines; and it is searchable, often instantly".⁵⁰

Safety advice and rape prevention campaigns targeted towards women represent women as potential passive victims of sexual violence, emphasising and reminding them of their vulnerability and susceptibility to male violence, whilst also placing the burden on women to enact risk management to prevent their own sexual assault through modifying and monitoring their behaviours. They frame sexual violence as a relentless, inevitable, ever present and anonymous threat, instilling a sense of fear and vulnerability whilst emphasising women's ability to prevent being assaulted by being constantly prepared. In her blog post Hofheimer asserts that "violence prevention tips are always aimed at what the targeted person should do (judgement strongly implied) to protect themselves".⁵¹ Evidently, this operates on the logics of victim-blaming in which victims are seen as somehow responsible for their own assault due to their actions, which can play out on social media, in the mainstream media and in trial proceedings. Indeed, Serisier explains that this is a contemporary form of neoliberalism in which "a commitment to victims' rights sits alongside

⁵⁰ Marwick 2019, p. 310.

⁵¹ Hofheimer 2011 [<https://canyourelate.org/2011/05/24/rape-prevention-tips/>], accessed 21 May 2021.

a political insistence that individuals take responsibility to managing their own risk”, which also fits longstanding strategies of victim-blaming.⁵² Moreover, those who are seen to have failed to take responsibility or manage risk are not granted protection or public sympathy.⁵³ RCS national campaigns *This Is Not An Invitation To Rape Me* and *Not Ever* (launched in 2008 and 2010, respectively and the websites for which are listed at the bottom of the *10 Top Tips* poster) also seek to tackle prejudicial victim-blaming narratives and attitudes, particularly surrounding dress, drinking, intimacy and relationships and the myths that fuel them, especially in relation to the damaging impact they have on restricting justice for women and the traumatising scrutiny women experience within rape trials.⁵⁴ Both of these campaigns, like *10 Top Tips*, seek to shift the responsibility onto perpetrators, by tackling the impunity and lack of scrutiny they experience and critiquing the ways in which the rapist’s behaviour is excused based on the actions and appearance of the victim.

10 Top Tips culture jams rape prevention and “safety” tips targeted towards women by humorously yet bluntly satirising and inverting such rhetoric and redirecting the responsibility towards potential perpetrators. This serves as a disruption to and intervention in the transmission of such victim-blaming messaging within public and media discourses, whilst providing relief from such rhetoric. (Feminist) culture jamming, as a form of dissensus, especially in the context of social media and network technologies, can raise awareness of

⁵² Serisier 2018, pp. 38-39.

⁵³ Serisier 2018, pp. 38-39.

⁵⁴ Rape Crisis Scotland [<https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/campaigns-not-invitation/>], accessed 3 June 2021; *This is not an invitation to rape me* [<https://www.thisisnotaninvitationtorapeme.co.uk/home/>], accessed 3 June 2021; Rape Crisis Scotland [<https://www.rapecrisisscotland.org.uk/campaigns-not-ever/>], accessed 3 June 2021; *Not Ever* [<https://www.notever.co.uk/>], accessed 3 June 2021.

often silenced issues and empower audiences to be active around an issue.⁵⁵ This dissensus empowers women and feminists by demonstrating that it is acceptable to object, challenge and change cultural conditions, utilising social media to share such perspectives, as highlighted by Stephanie Madden *et al.*⁵⁶ The subversive tactics evident in Hofheimer's blog post and *10 Top Tips* and their popularity and widespread use across social media demonstrate the urge to challenge and dismantle, via digital networked technologies, the conditions within rape culture that allow perpetrators to act with impunity whilst victims are scrutinised and policed.

Culture jamming on social media allows for dialogue with outside audiences, garnering greater participation and expanding the pool of instigators and direct participants.⁵⁷ Therefore, this shows how culture jamming can be used on social media as a mobilising and galvanising tactic as well as a community-building tool, as evidenced by the ongoing support for and recurring adaptation and resurfacing of Hofheimer's blog post and this form of subversion. Sundén and Paasonen illustrate that "fleeting forms of networked feminist politics take shape by using collective imagination, humour and wit to refuel feminist connective practices".⁵⁸ In addition to this, Madden *et al* argue that "culture jamming through social media is a form of pro-social trolling", as in essence trolling is "creating dissensus within a community to elicit a reaction".⁵⁹ This is evidenced by how the original

⁵⁵ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, pp. 172-73.

⁵⁶ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 182.

⁵⁷ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 180.

⁵⁸ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 120.

⁵⁹ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 181.

blog post went viral causing connection and shared laughter amongst women and feminists and backlash from men who felt targeted and discriminated against.

Notably, most other examples of this kind of subversive rhetoric are solely textual, such as Hofheimer's original blog post, Silverman's tweet and similar instances of hashtag activism, therefore RCS's visual choices are important to consider. The design of and image within *10 Top Tips* is directly taken from Alexander Rodchenko's 1924 advertising poster that reads "BOOKS in all fields of knowledge", which contains a photograph of author and socialite Lilya Brik, who had connections to the Russian avant-garde (fig. 37). In (re)appropriating a Russian constructivist poster, RCS is similarly referencing the building towards a new world or future. This is furthered by Madden *et al*, who highlight that dissensus evident within culture jamming can become consensus in showing support for positive changes in that a reimagined future can become possible.⁶⁰ Notably, Vladimir Lenin, the head of government of Soviet Russia and subsequently the Soviet Union (1917-24), advocated for the emancipation of women. The contribution of women was seen as essential for the progression of Communism within the Soviet Union and thus depictions of women were often used in Soviet propaganda to rally the female population.⁶¹ Indeed, Rodchenko's poster is a depiction of women's voice and amplification. In using an image of women's voice, RCS are configuring a world in which women are not silenced by victim-blaming

⁶⁰ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 180.

⁶¹ Under Lenin's leadership, the Soviet Union enacted a number of legal and domestic policy reforms that advanced the position of women, such as the legalisation of abortion in 1922. However, it can be argued that there was a regression in the position of women under Josef Stalin (Lenin's successor), as Leninist reforms were overturned (such as the abolition of abortion in 1936) and there was a retreat to Conservatism.

narratives, but rather potential perpetrators are held responsible for their actions.

Moreover, the use of the headscarf in Rodchenko's image appears to make Brik representative of the female worker and the proletariat, a recurring motif within Soviet art and propaganda. Alongside the call for knowledge, literacy, education and learning this perhaps indicates the Soviet Union's task of mobilising and transforming the thinking of the largely rural and illiterate population. Therefore, RCS can be seen to be employing an explicitly political visual language that similarly suggests a call to arms or solidarity.



Fig. 37 Alexander Rodchenko, *BOOKS in all fields of knowledge*, 1924, advertising poster for The Board of the Leningrad branch of state publishing house Gosizdat. Private Collection.

Furthermore, like Hofheimer's blog post, Rodchenko's 1924 poster has been adapted and (re)appropriated numerous times and continues to resurface and be recirculated in its various forms. For example, it was clearly referenced on the cover of the 2005 Franz

Ferdinand album *You Could Have It So Much Better*. Also, the portrait of Brik was used as the main image to publicise the 2008 exhibition 'Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography' at the Hayward Gallery in London and was used for the cover of the exhibition catalogue. This demonstrates how Rodchenko's poster and portrait of Brik has become part of the popular culture imaginary and public consciousness. Most notably, the poster was adapted by David Redon in 2014 to create a version depicting Beyoncé exhorting girl power messaging in the form of the lyrics to her 2011 song 'Run the World (Girls)' (fig. 38). This highlights the repeated (re)appropriation and adaptation of Rodchenko's poster for (popular) feminist purposes, due to it being a representation of women's voice and amplification. In contrast to Redon's work which depicts a celebrity feminism version of female empowerment, *10 Top Tips* is subversive and explicitly activist, retaining Rodchenko's portrait of Brik for seemingly political purposes. Nevertheless, although the RCS campaign is fuelled by rage and frustration, this coexists with shared feminist laughter and joy, the latter of which is evident in Brik's expression, in response to the absurdity of victim-blaming rhetoric that is revealed through its inversion, providing a sense of relief. This shows how humour can nurture joy and resilience in face of continuing rape culture.



Fig. 38 David Redon, *Who Run The World? Girls*, 2014.

The subversion of victim-blaming rhetoric by inverting such discourses and targeting them towards potential perpetrators is not distinctive to online iterations of feminist activism nor to the fourth wave, despite its recent heightened visibility. Indeed, Granet's 1980s *Emily Post Street Signs* series includes an instruction to men to "curb your animal instinct", depicting a man struggling to hold back a crazed beast-like creature on the end of a lead, representing men's "animal instinct", as it lunges towards a passing woman (fig. 39). Another proclaims, "no cat calls, whistling, kissing sounds", which portrays a cat leaning out the window of a van, playing on the term "cat calling", with a woman standing in front, leaning forward with her finger raised and she appears to be blowing a whistle, thus adopting the position of a police officer directing traffic. This project came from Granet's experience of New York

“mashers” (men who make remarks and advances to women).⁶² She says, “you can't walk down the street without being subjected to sexual innuendoes”, “men may see it as no more than being playful and complimentary, but I think it is traumatizing to a woman”.⁶³

Therefore, Granet rejects the expectation that women should be flattered or unbothered by street harassment by focussing on the behaviour of perpetrators. In this series, Granet culture jams road signs by altering the text and imagery but maintaining their bold and graphic style and shape in order to create humorous public feminist signs that instruct potential perpetrators not to sexually harass women. A spokesperson for the city’s Transportation Department said that the works are not official directives and that “this is definitely not a traffic sign per se, you aren’t obliged to obey it”, although perhaps Granet would disagree.⁶⁴ Similar to *10 Top Tips*, Granet is subverting the discourse surrounding sexual violence by inverting gendered risk management exhortations and shifting the impetus onto men.

⁶² Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁶³ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁶⁴ Jacobs 19 August 1988.



Fig. 39 Ilona Granet, *Emily Post Street Signs*, 1986-89, screenprint on metal.

As argued by Sundén and Paasonen, the most visible and widely spread online feminist (humorous) initiatives prioritise gender differences and operate within the framework of binary gender, echoing feminist tactics of the second wave, thus effacing other differences such as race, class, age and sexuality.⁶⁵ The victim presented in *10 Tops Tips* is explicitly female and the perpetrator and target of the poster is presumed male, thereby affirming the binary of the passive female victim and the active male abuser, rendering invisible other factors which make people more vulnerable to sexual violence. Similarly, in Granet's street signs the harasser is male and the victim is female, as well as seemingly white and middle-class, although is conveyed as more active than in *10 Top Tips*. Nevertheless, by playing with the gender binary, these works are perhaps reinforcing and failing to challenge the heterosexist power relations that they are supposedly critiquing. However, operating within

⁶⁵ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 6 and 112.

this binary allows for a subversive inversion that opens space for laughter and it is through this reversal that both works reveal the absurdity of the gender binary within rape and street harassment prevention messaging. Indeed, Sundén and Paasonen show that this binary gender logic provides campaigns with their popular appeal and resonance, with the simplicity of the binary making it compelling and seductive, fuelling comic interventions and attempting to turn the tables.⁶⁶ Moreover, as the dynamics are easily recognised and complexities are negated, the works are easy for audiences to engage with quickly.

As outlined in my introduction, the use of alternative spaces, in particular the public sphere, is significant for the display of feminist art beyond the confines of mainstream and commercial art institutions, as I explore in more detail further on. But the bureaucratic and financial obstacles that Granet faced to produce these signs and situate them in the public realm, indicate the ways in which social media has made producing and circulating this kind of subversive material much easier and more accessible. Granet spent \$3500 (some of which came from grants) to produce 100 signs, twelve of which were to be installed in Lower Manhattan and the rest were to be sold through an art gallery.⁶⁷ Granet also had to go the great lengths to get approval of the city's Transportation Department, including liability insurance.⁶⁸ In contrast to this, whilst people can request hard copies of *10 Top Tips* from the RCS website, a downloadable PDF is also available of the poster and postcard, thus making it easily circulated and disseminated online.

⁶⁶ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 6, 123 and 133.

⁶⁷ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁶⁸ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

Notably, the opposition that Granet faced from local communities echoes the backlash that Silverman faced when she tweeted Hofheimer's list. Whilst Granet won permission from the Transportation Department and Community Board in Lower Manhattan to install her signs and they began to go up on Wall Street within a few days, she faced opposition from the Community Board in Greenwich Village which unanimously voted against the signs.⁶⁹ Board member Arthur Stickler claims that "there was a feeling that it was reverse sexism, showing men as animals".⁷⁰ District manager of the Community Board, Paul Goldstein, elaborates on this by explaining that it was a controversial decision, some felt it was inappropriate and might have the opposite effect and encourage men to make more comments towards women, but recalls that the majority of the opposition came from male members of the board.⁷¹ Granet felt that members of the Wall Street area Community Board "recognised it as art in the public interest".⁷² However, the backlash that Granet and Silverman faced for this kind of inversion demonstrates the extent to which the public, predominantly men, are uncomfortable when such directives are redirected towards men, whilst victim-blaming and the advocacy of women taking safety precautions remain a prominent feature of public discourse both on and offline. Therefore, all of this raises the question of who is laughing and at whom or what?

⁶⁹ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁷⁰ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁷¹ Jacobs 19 August 1988.

⁷² Jacobs 19 August 1988.

Notably, in the years that followed the creation of *10 Top Tips* it was retweeted with the hashtag #SafetyTipsForLadies, thus the poster was inserted into the narratives and commentary forged through the hashtag. #SafetyTipsForLadies was created by Hilary Bowman-Smart on 21 March 2013, due to her exasperation with dominant victim-blaming anti-rape advice that exhorts women to self-manage risks.⁷³ Tweets using #SafetyTipsForLadies criticised the victim-blaming of rape prevention tips, emphasising the need to shift the focus from urging women to manage their own safety to perpetrators and how to solve the problem of sexual violence (some tweets even offered suggestions that people found helpful).⁷⁴ Some tweets also humorously satirised the individualising and paranoia-inducing advice-giving tropes of anti-rape risk management and safety “tips” by employing irony and exaggeration to expose the irrationality and absurdity of victim-blaming rhetoric “while also criticising the stranger danger paradigm of rape prevention”, as highlighted by Rentschler.⁷⁵ Prior to March 2013 hashtags like #SafetyTipsForWomen shared tips, like ones on self-defence, which focussed on potential victims.⁷⁶ Therefore, the (re)appropriation and subversion of a related hashtag formed a blockage, humorously intervening in and taking over the transmission of such messaging whilst creating a dialogue. Indeed, Rentschler argues that the campaign “simultaneously hijacked typical prevention discourse and repopulated Twitter channels with a different kind of peer-to-peer advice giving”.⁷⁷

⁷³ Rentschler 2015, p. 353.

⁷⁴ Rentschler 2015, p. 354.

⁷⁵ Rentschler 2015, p. 354.

⁷⁶ Rentschler 2015, p. 353.

⁷⁷ Rentschler 2015, p. 354. This notion of hijacking clearly echoes detournement, which, as I have explored, is closely related to culture jamming.

Through its widespread dissemination, #SafetyTipsForLadies was able to reframe the terms of debate surrounding sexual violence, garnering broader media attention to rape prevention discourse through the “derisive laughter that energises current feminisms”.⁷⁸

This further demonstrates how humour and anti-sexual violence activism can coexist and are mutually sustaining and beneficial, with laughter providing relief, making such emotionally heavy work lighter to bear and enabling bodies to act.

Moreover, #SafetyTipsForLadies further illustrates the community-building function of shared feminist laughter. Indeed, Sundén and Paasonen convey that “ripples of laughter intensify digital connectivity”, pulling bodies together.⁷⁹ This is furthered by Marwick who asserts that “shared humour can create feeling of intimate community and belonging” and hashtag feminism in using humour, irony and critique can contribute to building affective ties and creating affective responses.⁸⁰ As such, the hashtag was able to forge and allow for the expression of communal feminist affect surrounding victim-blaming and rape culture. Rentschler maintains that “feminist responses to rape culture are organised as much by affective solidarities as they are by technological networks of online distribution”.⁸¹ Marwick develops this by explaining that “rather than solidifying around any single site or grouping of sites, feminist affect exists within a network of digital connections that enable women to share their experience and co-experience rage, frustration, and anger with sexism and

⁷⁸ Rentschler 2015, p. 355.

⁷⁹ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 155.

⁸⁰ Marwick 2019, p. 322.

⁸¹ Rentschler 2014, p. 78.

intersectional oppression”.⁸² Affective experiences of anger and frustration evident in *10 Top Tips* and #SafetyTipsForLadies coexist with humour, joy and shared feminist laughter, which provide relief from such negative affect, forging discussions and commentary whilst (humorously) expressing feminist critique. This coexistence of affective responses within #SafetyTipsForLadies, similar to *10 Top Tips*, simultaneously forges “collectivised expressions of feminist ‘fed-upness’” in response to rape culture, “reveals the feminist delight in exposing misogynist, victim blaming ideas through humour in ways that resonated around the internet” and “illustrates how humour nurtures a politics of joy and resilience in the face of rape culture and its apologists”, as highlighted by Rentschler.⁸³ Overall, this demonstrates how these differing affective responses intersect when humour sits alongside experiences of sexual violence, performing galvanising, community-building and survivalist functions.

Rentschler argues that tweets using #SafetyTipsForLadies were quickly generated and circulated “demonstrating how humour fuels the dissemination of feminist ideas via social media”.⁸⁴ In the context of online culture jamming, the use of hashtags can help sustain attention, bring awareness and build dialogue, thus challenging the criticism that such activist tactics only cause momentary attention.⁸⁵ Hashtags create discussions, education, connections, community and an increasing and evolving support network both in the immediate unfolding and aftermath and over time with audiences being continuously and repeatedly developed and galvanised due to the “constant and continuing nature of social

⁸² Marwick 2019, p. 319.

⁸³ Rentschler 2015, pp. 354-55.

⁸⁴ Rentschler 2015, p. 354.

⁸⁵ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 175.

media” and searchability of hashtags.⁸⁶ Therefore, a “sustained online presence” is established, as demonstrated by the continued resurfacing of *10 Top Tips* on social media.⁸⁷ Madden *et al* maintain that, where social media content is held onto by the platform and is searchable, the material can essentially become eternal.⁸⁸ Yet, it is important to consider the process and mutation of such campaigns as part of the larger movement, as suggested by Lawrence and Ringrose, as I have done by mapping out the biography of *10 Top Tips*.⁸⁹

Although *10 Top Tips* manifests as a physical poster or postcard, its origins and points of (re)circulation highlight its productivity within the realm of digital connectivity, which sits alongside RCS’ significant offline activism and advocacy. However, to what extent *10 Top Tips*’ dissemination extends beyond the online feminist community (or echo chamber) is unclear, whereas Granet’s *Emily Post Street Signs* infiltrate the public realm at street-level in the form of directive road signs. In this sense, by going beyond the confines of the feminist community, perhaps Granet’s signs have the potential to have a greater impact on the attitudes and consciousness of members of the public. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Granet’s works do not have the same feminist community-building function as *10 Top Tips*. But the feminist community-building and connectivity that is so evidently fundamental to the narrative of *10 Top Tips* perhaps somewhat limits its reach to the online feminist community, who have repeatedly witnessed the (re)circulation of this form of subversion,

⁸⁶ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 182.

⁸⁷ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 182.

⁸⁸ Madden, Janoske, Winkler and Harpole 2018, p. 182.

⁸⁹ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 22.

thus hindering its ability to shift the discourse surrounding victims and perpetrators in the broader public sphere.

6.4 Irony in *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* by the Guerrilla Girls and Ruptures in its Lesbian Reworking

By comparing *10 Top Tips* to *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* by the Guerrilla Girls, in this section I consider the use of subversive tactics, such as (re)appropriation, inversion, satire and irony, in feminist posters, in order to further demonstrate the continuities and connections across feminist waves. Furthermore, I explore how Ridykeulous' (re)appropriation and alteration of the original work in *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* can point to ruptures within notions of feminist community or connectivity.

The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous feminist artist collective, focussed on tackling the exclusion and marginalisation of women and people of colour in the art world and broader cultural sphere. They formed in 1985 in New York City in response to an underwhelming protest outside the Museum of Modern Art which was campaigning against an exhibition entitled *An International Survey of Recent Painting and Sculpture*, because of the 169 artists on display only thirteen were women and eight were artists of colour.⁹⁰ As a result, the founding members decided there was a more effective, confrontational and unforgettable way to challenge people's preconceptions and "prove to them that the art system isn't a meritocracy where museums galleries, critics and collectors always know best".⁹¹ So, they

⁹⁰ Guerrilla Girls 2020, p. 5.

⁹¹ Guerrilla Girls 2020, p. 5.

began a poster campaign targeting museums, dealers, curators, critics and artists “who they felt were actively responsible for, or complicit in, the exclusion of women and non-white artists from mainstream exhibitions and publications”, as explained by Elizabeth Manchester.⁹² In April 1985 posters began appearing in Soho and the East Village, areas in which artists lived and displayed their work, after the Guerrilla Girls snuck around in the middle of the night putting them up, employing the tactics of street artists.⁹³ Therefore, as highlighted by Anna C. Chave, they were appropriating the urban landscape often, if not always, in unauthorised ways, akin to the commonplace strategies of other emergent collectives and individual artists like Jenny Holzer.⁹⁴ Notably, these practices of such street-based work, which are rooted in posters and advertising, emerged in the 1980s, during the Ronald Reagan era and the flourishing of neoliberalism in the US. Moreover, the Guerrilla Girls are known for their use of subversion, humour and culture jamming across their campaigns and projects, yet according to Chave their recognisable sly, sardonic humour did not emerge until 1986, thus their works occurred alongside those of Granet.⁹⁵

The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist is a poster in the Guerrilla Girls’ “recognisably bold monochrome style”, which uses irony and humour to expose and critique gendered double standards in the art world and the struggles, obstacles and discriminations that women

⁹² Manchester 2004 [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>], accessed 8 July 2020.

⁹³ Withers 1988, p. 285; Guerrilla Girls 2020, p. 5.

⁹⁴ Chave 2011, p. 106

⁹⁵ Chave 2011, p. 104.

artists face (fig. 40).⁹⁶ The poster employs a form of ironic inversion as a critical and political device by listing a series of disadvantages as advantages. For example, “not having to be in shows with men” refers to the exclusion of women from mainstream and commercial art institutions and exhibitions, yet it also appears to be playing on the misandrist or man-hating stereotypes of feminists. In fact, the Guerrilla Girls repeatedly play on and challenge negative stereotypes of feminists. Indeed, with *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, the Guerrilla Girls felt that “after being described as whiny and negative [...] it was time to help women look on the positive side of their situation. We turned the disadvantages of being a woman artist into advantages.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, they can be seen to be making references to the struggles of specific artists, for example “knowing your career might pick up when you’re eighty” appears to nod to artists like Alice Neel and Louise Bourgeois.⁹⁸ They also seek to undermine the model of “artist-as-individual-(male)-genius” in their point “not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius”, an issue that has been called into question since the beginnings of feminist art criticism, which is also part of the appeal of the democratic conceit of collectives to feminists, as identified by Chave.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Tate [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/guerrilla-girls-6858/who-are-guerrilla-girls>], accessed 8 July 2020. The Guerrilla Girls note that women across different industries resonated with the poster and an artist even sent them money to run it as an advertisement in *Artforum* (Guerrilla Girls 2020, p. 20).

⁹⁷ Guerrilla Girls 2020, p. 20.

⁹⁸ Chave 2011, p. 105.

⁹⁹ Chave 2011, p. 106.

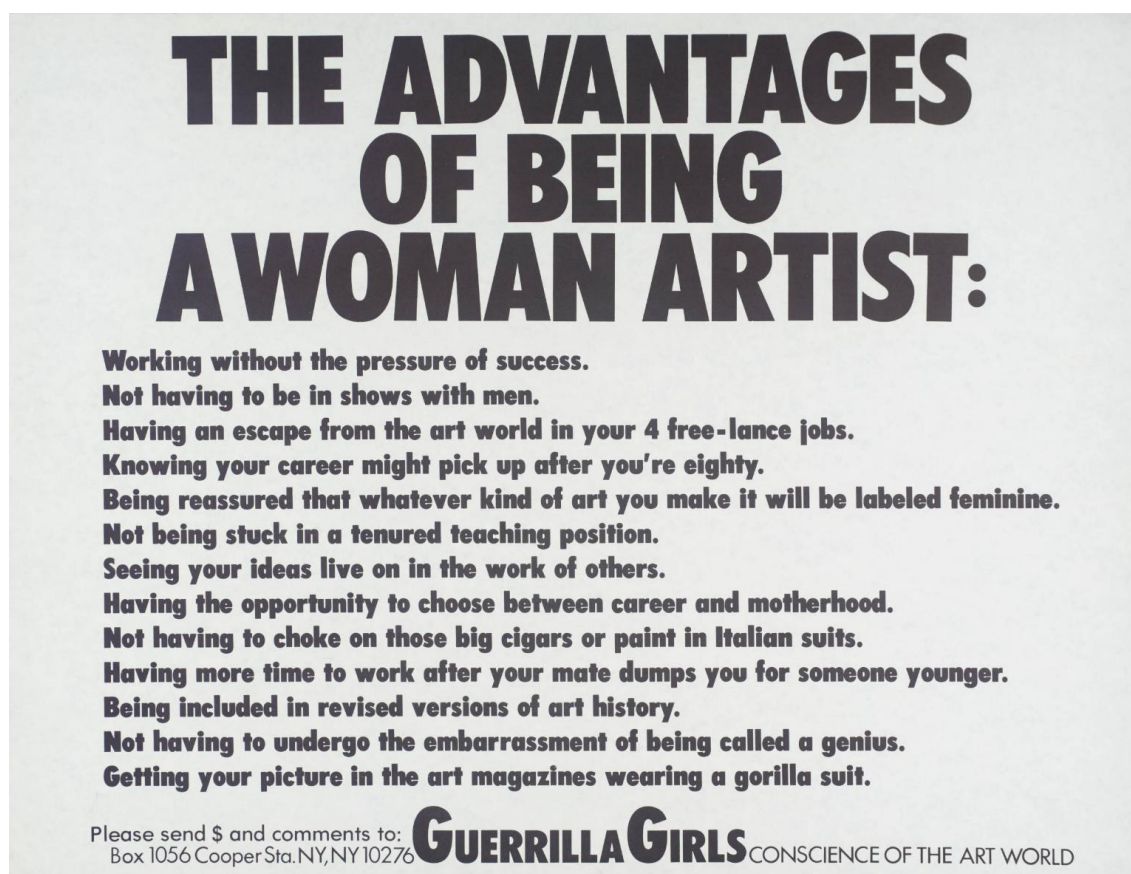


Fig. 40 Guerrilla Girls, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988, screenprint on paper, 43 x 56 cm. Tate Modern, London.

Evidently, there are some points of comparison that can be drawn between *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* and *10 Top Tips*, such as the use of (re)appropriation, inversion, satire and irony as ways to expose and undermine gendered double standards pertaining to the art world in the former and rape prevention messaging in the latter. In exploring the ways in which (re)appropriation can reproduce hegemonic patriarchal norms, rather than challenge or critique them, limiting protests' (particularly gendered body protests such as FEMEN and SlutWalk) subversive potential, O'Keefe discusses the risks of (re)appropriation

as a subversive strategy.¹⁰⁰ O’Keefe contends that subversiveness rests on the ability to exaggerate parody so it is unmistakably read as ironic, failing to do so erases the subversive aspect.¹⁰¹ Therefore, attempts to (re)appropriate and reclaim can succumb to a double-bind where the failure to articulate or communicate irony and parody means it is not recognised by the viewer as ironic or subversive and thus can be read as embodying, reproducing or (re)appropriating patriarchal norms “through the inability to effectively re-imagine them as ironic”.¹⁰² Indeed, the use of inversion in both *10 Top Tips* and *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* makes both works unmistakably ironic to those with a shared feminist consciousness. However, as evidenced by the response to Silverman’s tweet, anti-feminists and those who feel threatened or victimised by feminism did not read Hofheimer’s list as ironic or satirical but rather saw it as a confirmation that feminists are seeking to attack men. Similarly, those who do not acknowledge or recognise the struggles faced by women artists may not read *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* as ironic but may simply misinterpret it as an unironic list of advantages.

Moreover, the Guerrilla Girls have been criticised for reinforcing the validity and dominance of mainstream and commercial art institutions and failing to critique art world systems by seeking equal representation within such institutions.¹⁰³ This is reflective of the debate amongst feminist artists between those advocating for dismantling or overhauling the art

¹⁰⁰ O’Keefe 2014. O’Keefe defines (re)appropriation as a form of “subversive reclamation”, thus evidently demonstrating the intersections between the themes of this chapter and the previous one, which she argues is not a new feminist tactic and draws on “the ways in which gendered performance can simultaneously make gender explicit while also performing it ironically” (O’Keefe 2014, p. 4).

¹⁰¹ O’Keefe 2014, p. 4.

¹⁰² O’Keefe 2014, pp. 4-5 and 11.

¹⁰³ As identified by Withers 1988, p. 288 and Chave 2011, p. 103.

world system and those who advocated for access, assimilation and representation.¹⁰⁴ This is furthered by Chave who argues that:

The larger issues implicitly entailed in the Guerrilla Girls' initiatives somewhat mirrored those long vexing Affirmative Action programs generally, namely: whether a mandate for diversification augured a salutary broadening of the (art) field, or a relaxing of standards long governing that field of both; and whether those standards themselves might be shown to be biased or otherwise unsound.¹⁰⁵

Despite such debates and criticisms, the Guerrilla Girls claim to critique and question systems and structures of power and how decisions are made within art institutions.¹⁰⁶

The comparable use of humour in *10 Top Tips* and the Guerrilla Girls' work further shows the use of humour and laughter as political tools within feminism and feminist artistic practices. Similarly, in recent years, negative stereotypes of feminists thrived during the so-called "backlash" of the 1980s, in which derisions of feminists being strident, humourless, puritanical and man-hating intensified.¹⁰⁷ According to Chave, the reputation of feminists being humourless emerged in response to sober faced activists shown to the public when dealing with serious issues, yet feminists amongst themselves used wit and relied on laughter in order to keep morale high.¹⁰⁸ Cochrane echoes this by maintaining that for activists working every day to tackle difficult and repressing issues "humour is a political tactic, a way to stay focused and hopeful".¹⁰⁹ This is evident in *10 Top Tips* where humour is partly used to provide relief from victim-blaming rhetoric and make such emotionally heavy

¹⁰⁴ Chave 2011, p. 103.

¹⁰⁵ Chave 2011, p. 103.

¹⁰⁶ Withers 1988, p. 288.

¹⁰⁷ Chave 2011, p. 104.

¹⁰⁸ Chave 2011, p. 104.

¹⁰⁹ Cochrane 2013, p. 148.

labour lighter to bear. Therefore, across feminist waves humour has been employed as a survival strategy. Furthermore, like much of the use of humour within the fourth wave, which helps content circulate more quickly and widely on social media, the Guerrilla Girls saw humour as invaluable in reaching wider audiences as it made people feel “in” on the joke, reflecting the notion of shared feminist laughter and connectivity through humour.¹¹⁰ Chave furthers this by arguing that the Guerrilla Girls insisted on a “plainspoken, often humorous approach geared to a general art public. That is how the collective’s members drew their improbably substantial audience by acting as gadflies, raising their bluntly, wryly feminist voices and tirelessly taking to the road and the streets”.¹¹¹

As well as the work of the Guerrilla Girls being built upon and adapted by other artists, as I explore further on, the Guerrilla Girls’ posters indicate continuities in certain artistic practices, which still remain prevalent. For example, the Guerrilla Girls tacitly built on the history of politically motivated conceptual art that dates back to the 1960s, which is often referred to an “institutional critique”.¹¹² Moreover, as highlighted by Chave, work consisting of solely text or images and text was intrinsic to conceptual art practices since the 1960s and Holzer brought new interest and visibility to such text-centred work with her *Truisms* and *Inflammatory Essays*, which infiltrated the public space during the late 1970s and 1980s.¹¹³ Also, the photo-text format gained new importance in the 1980s through the work of artists

¹¹⁰ Chave 2011, p. 104.

¹¹¹ Chave 2011, p. 111.

¹¹² Chave 2011, p. 105.

¹¹³ Chave 2011, p. 106.

like Barbara Kruger.¹¹⁴ Like Kruger and Holzer, the Guerrilla Girls “appropriated the visual language of advertising, specifically fly-posting, to convey their messages in a quick and accessible manner”, as explained by Manchester.¹¹⁵ Therefore, this shows the ways in which art historical continuities and connections are embedded into the work of the Guerrilla Girls, further exemplifying that such practices, like infiltrating the public space, combining text and images and feminist culture jamming, are not distinct to fourth wave visual culture or online forms of feminism. The continuities evident in the work of the Guerrilla Girls are continuing to be pulled forward into the contemporary moment through the work of artists and collectives like Ridykeulous.

Artists who founded the Guerrilla Girls were also shaped by the 1970s feminist art movement and were indebted to their principles and practices. For example, the Guerrilla Girls’ sly, sardonic humour owed a tacit debt to 1970s feminists, according to Chave, whilst also maintaining the idealism which spawned the movement in the early 1970s.¹¹⁶ Simultaneously, there are also numerous discontinuities which appear to reinforce an oppositional perspective between feminist generations and echo the notion of reclaiming or rebranding feminism that I discussed in the previous chapter. Indeed, Chave demonstrates that the Guerrilla Girls devised new tactics to assert their claims in the different climate of

¹¹⁴ Chave 2011, p. 106.

¹¹⁵ Manchester 2004 [<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>], accessed 8 July 2020.

¹¹⁶ Chave 2011, p. 104; Withers 1988, p. 290.

the 1980s, as they saw outworn tactics were unmatched to the moment of intense

backlash.¹¹⁷ This is furthered by Josephine Withers who identifies that:

The Guerrilla Girls claim they don't want to make the same mistakes as earlier feminist groups: they particularly want to avoid ideological and personal grandstanding. They prefer to use statistics and other verifiable data that demonstrate general patterns of discrimination against women and minorities and tend to focus on practical and material results.¹¹⁸

Moreover, the Guerrilla Girls felt that there was a need for a new image and kind of language that appealed to younger generations.¹¹⁹ Consequently, the Guerrilla Girls pursued what had been done before during the 1970s, but using a different kind of language and style.¹²⁰ Notably, the Guerrilla Girls periodically appropriate and adapt their own work by updating and reworking iconic posters of the 1980s to show the contemporary relevance and pervasiveness of the issues that they continue to campaign against today; that these inequalities are ongoing and unsolved. This exemplifies the overlapping and intersecting of feminist waves and the ways in which feminists can productively turn to previous feminist temporalities to gain knowledge and expertise which can help shape feminism in order to more effectively respond to current and ongoing issues.

As well as being translated into numerous languages over the years, *The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist* has also been (re)appropriated and culture jammed by Ridykeulous in 2006, during the latter part of the third wave, to create *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* (fig. 41). Ridykeulous was established in 2005 and is a collaborative queer and feminist

¹¹⁷ Chave 2011, p. 104.

¹¹⁸ Withers 1988, p. 288.

¹¹⁹ Chave 2011, p. 104.

¹²⁰ Chave 2011, p. 104.

curatorial partnership between artists Nicole Eisenman and A.L. Steiner and they are dedicated to producing events, writings and exhibitions which use humour and irony to critique the art world.¹²¹

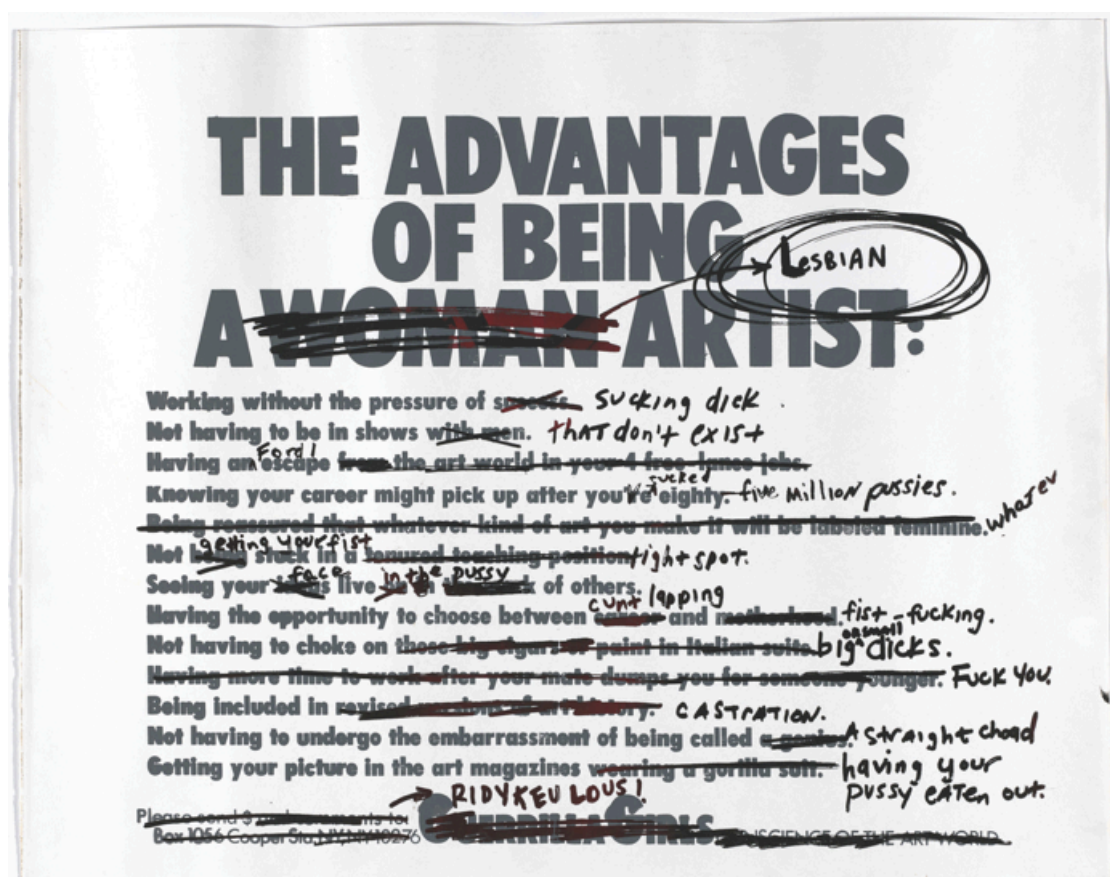


Fig. 41 Ridykeulous, *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist*, 2006, screenprint, 48.1 x 60.9 cm. Museum of Modern art, New York City.

Unlike the other case studies on which I focus in this chapter, *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* takes something feminist and transforms it into something queer, rather than taking something misogynistic or anti-feminist and making it feminist. Much of the reworking transforms the meaning of the original points to centre on lesbian sex or not

¹²¹ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 210.

having sexual relations with men. Like *10 Top Tips* and Granet's street signs, the original work affirms the gender binary between the struggling female artist and the successful male "genius", but Ridykeulous' reworking queers this. This is supported by Grant, who argues that a "queering of feminist histories", which I discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Cassils, is evident in *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist*, which is "a violently sexual reworking" of the classic Guerrilla Girls poster.¹²² Alongside the repeated use of obscenities and blunt and graphic descriptions of sexual acts, this sense of violence is heightened by the scribbled and erratic writing and crossings out, which give a sense of urgency and immediacy. Indeed, Grant suggests that the negative connotations of the "fan" (which is short for fanatic) allows for the subjectivity of fandom to appear in which violence can be enacted on a fan object, even out of desire.¹²³ She furthers this by maintaining that:

This alteration and intense engagement with the object of interest, allows for a more active model of contemporary art's utilisation of previous political moments, one that focusses on what is done to the concept of second-wave feminism by this contemporary appropriation. Rather than a straightforward re-enactment or scholarly research into a historical moment, the figure of the fan brings up the irrational, passionate and violent aspects of the desire to embrace feminism.¹²⁴

However, it is unclear to whom Ridykeulous' violence, rage and frustration is directed in their rewriting of the Guerrilla Girls' points. "Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger" is completely crossed out and responded to with the words "fuck you". This is perhaps a rejection of the perceived heteronormativity of the original work. Similarly, "being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be

¹²² Grant 2011, p. 276.

¹²³ Grant 2011, p. 272.

¹²⁴ Grant 2011, p. 272.

labelled feminine” is again fully crossed out and the word “whatev” is written next to it. This suggests an exasperation or indifference towards traditional gender norms and expectations of femininity or the original work’s perceived cisnormativity. Ahmed regards the lesbian feminist as wilful and unquestionably “a killjoy figure; so often coming up as being anti, antisex, antifun; antilife. [...] To live out a lesbian life is to become willingly estranged from the causes of happiness. No wonder she causes unhappiness”.¹²⁵ In this sense, in *The Advantages of being a Lesbian Artist*, Ridykeulous can be seen to be killing feminist joy by refusing to be made happy by the original poster as well as heteronormative narratives and the heteropatriarchy by wilfully disrupting them.

Eisenman maintains that *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* “points to the fact that this is all an ongoing conversation. It’s open and everything can and should be edited. These artists should be able to come back and edit their or anybody else’s work”, thus exemplifying the dialogue between feminist waves.¹²⁶ But, perhaps the work’s aggressiveness and rage undermines this notion of dialogue and call and response. Indeed, Ridykeulous have also crossed out the Guerrilla Girls’ name, address and slogan at the bottom of the poster and have reauthored it, which feels particularly aggressive. Eisenman also asserts that “we frequently are and can easily be made, powerless and voiceless in our culture. So, we’re giving ourselves permission to be dictators. Because nobody else will”.¹²⁷ Again, this perhaps

¹²⁵ Ahmed 2017, p. 222.

¹²⁶ Baran 19 March 2014 [<https://hyperallergic.com/115518/thank-god-its-not-abstract-a-ridykeulous-interview/>], accessed 30 June 2021.

¹²⁷ Baran 19 March 2014 [<https://hyperallergic.com/115518/thank-god-its-not-abstract-a-ridykeulous-interview/>], accessed 30 June 2021.

undermines their supposed focus on dialogue, by pursuing a form of authoritarianism.

Therefore, the work appears to be rupturing idealised transhistorical or intergenerational notions of feminist community by exposing divisions and fractures within feminism.

Grant argues that “at once both acknowledging the influence of the Guerrilla Girls’ posters, as well as challenging its political with a comply aggressive lesbian sexuality, here the fan re-writes the fan object to create the stories that are missing”.¹²⁸ Similarly, Ahmed thinks of lesbian feminism was a “wilfulness archive, a living and a lively archive made up and made out of our own experiences of struggling against what we come up against”, which in part derives from “our struggle to write ourselves into existence”.¹²⁹ As such, *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* could be regarded as a manifestation of this wilfulness archive, by including the, typically erased, experiences of lesbian artists. One point on the poster which remains centred on discrimination within the art world, that originally read “not having to be in shows with men”, is partially crossed out to read “not having to be in shows that don’t exist”, referring to the greater levels of marginalisation and exclusion that queer women artists face. Therefore, Ridykeulous’ adaptation can be seen to be reworking and editing the original poster so that queer feminists could identify with it, as highlighted by Gosling, Robinson and Tobin.¹³⁰ Again, this links to the notion of being “in” on a joke and shared (queer) feminist laughter through the recognition of shared experiences, which can facilitate community-building and connectivity. Similar to *10 Top Tips*, this demonstrates that whilst

¹²⁸ Grant 2011, p. 277.

¹²⁹ Ahmed 2017, pp. 222 and 230.

¹³⁰ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 210.

this kind of subversion, (re)appropriation and culture jamming can be humorous and joyful, particularly for those “in” on the joke, it can simultaneously be an expression of anger and frustration, an issue which I discuss in relation to the figure of the feminist killjoy further on.

Moreover, this further illustrates that this form of (re)appropriation is not distinctive to online iterations of feminism and the fourth wave, although digital networked technologies evidently make it easier and more accessible. Although the Guerrilla Girls did not respond to Ridykeulous’ version initially, they later asked to feature it in an exhibition, “indicating their acceptance and embracing of the critique”.¹³¹ This signals a responsiveness and acknowledgement of the critique yet is also perhaps a disarming or assimilating of it, or even an attempt to patch up the ruptures that Ridykeulous have created and exposed. Whilst *The Advantages of Being a Lesbian Artist* is abrasive and critical, it is not about “trashing” the Guerrilla Girls, but equally it is not about education or “calling in” (a practice articulated by Loretta Ross in response to “call out culture”).¹³² The work is not conducive to dialogue, but it has used subversion and humour to initiate acknowledgement from the Guerrilla Girls and conversation over an extended period. This reveals how time can give space to overcome initial defensiveness, in contrast to the immediacy and reactivity of social media, highlighting the differences between online and offline interactions.

¹³¹ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 210.

¹³² Ross 17 August 2019 [<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html>], accessed 15 June 2021; Ross 2019 [<https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/spring-2019/speaking-up-without-tearing-down>], accessed 15 June 2021.

6.5 Subverting the Dick Pic: A Detailed Analysis of Whitney Bell's *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*

This section explores how Bell's *I Didn't Ask For This* subverts online sexual harassment by (re)appropriating and in some ways satirising unsolicited images of penises to expose the pervasiveness and absurdity of such shared experiences. Furthermore, the exhibition exemplifies the entanglements of the online, offline, public, personal, political and private within fourth wave feminism through the public offline display (in an alternative site which replicates the domestic space) and documentation of online instances of sexual harassment. In redressing the lack of academic attention given to Bell's exhibition, my analysis demonstrates the continuities across waves in employing the male nude and domestic and alternative spaces as subversive devices within feminist art, by drawing comparisons to works of the 1970s feminist art movement, such as *Womanhouse*, Nochlin's *Achetez des Bananes* and Sleight's depictions of the male nude. These comparative analyses also complicate issues pertaining to the female gaze and the notion of reverse objectification, exemplifying the complex, ambivalent and often contradictory relationship that persists between the female gaze and desire and feminist critique. Finally, I explore how Bell embraces and reconfigures accusations of misandry or "reverse sexism", as well as echoes Ahmed's figure of the feminist killjoy, by showing that there can be collective joy in disrupting male comfort and sexual entitlement.

I Didn't Ask for This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics is an exhibition curated by artist, activist and prominent online feminist, Bell (fig. 42). The exhibition, which first opened in LA in 2016 and later travelled to San Francisco in 2017, alongside other cities, consists of over 150

unsolicited photos of penises that Bell, her female friends and members of feminist organisations received on social media. These images are displayed in a gallery space furnished as a recreation of Bell's apartment, alongside some of the comments that were sent with the images and the work of thirty women artists that explore "the female condition".¹³³



Fig. 42 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco.

¹³³ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9ElopO-lItXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7EybdgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2imI3djqtkBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

Despite accusations that the exhibition is an example of “revenge porn”, Bell maintains that it is not, comparing those making such accusations to All Lives Matter protestors.¹³⁴ This is because, as Bell suggests, neither group fully care about the issue that they are claiming to advocate for, as it is only being brought up when people are trying to seek visibility for a problem affecting a particular oppressed group.¹³⁵ As a result, Bell advocates that they should not be spending their time defending online harassers nor “harassing the harassed for calling out harassment”.¹³⁶ Therefore, the exhibition is representative of “calling out”, rather than “revenge porn”, which is often used as an online activist tool to demand accountability from those who have been able to act with impunity and has become particularly visible post-#MeToo and in the so-called “Weinstein Effect” era. Yet the exhibition is more focussed on calling out the abuse and harassment that women endure and refusing silence, rather than targeting individual men, as evidenced by the anonymisation of the senders. Indeed, Bell argues that:

This show is not about dick pics or the men who send them. This show is about giving women and femmes the agency to stand up to their harassers, to show them that

¹³⁴ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9Elopco-lltXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7EybdgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹³⁵ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9Elopco-lltXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7EybdgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹³⁶ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9Elopco-lltXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7EybdgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

they aren't alone, and to empower them to regain some control in a world that tells them their consent doesn't matter.¹³⁷

This is further exemplified in the framed interaction by Bye Felipe, a platform established in 2014 which calls out men who turn hostile in online interactions when their sexual advancements are ignored or rejected by women (fig. 43). The public sharing of hateful, disturbing or unwanted social media messages, including dick pics is a recognisable and well-known feminist social media tactic, rendering such abuse visible and the messages “objects of public witnessing, engagement and debate”, but surrounding which there is a “general trend of ethical laxness”, as emphasised by Sundén and Paasonen.¹³⁸

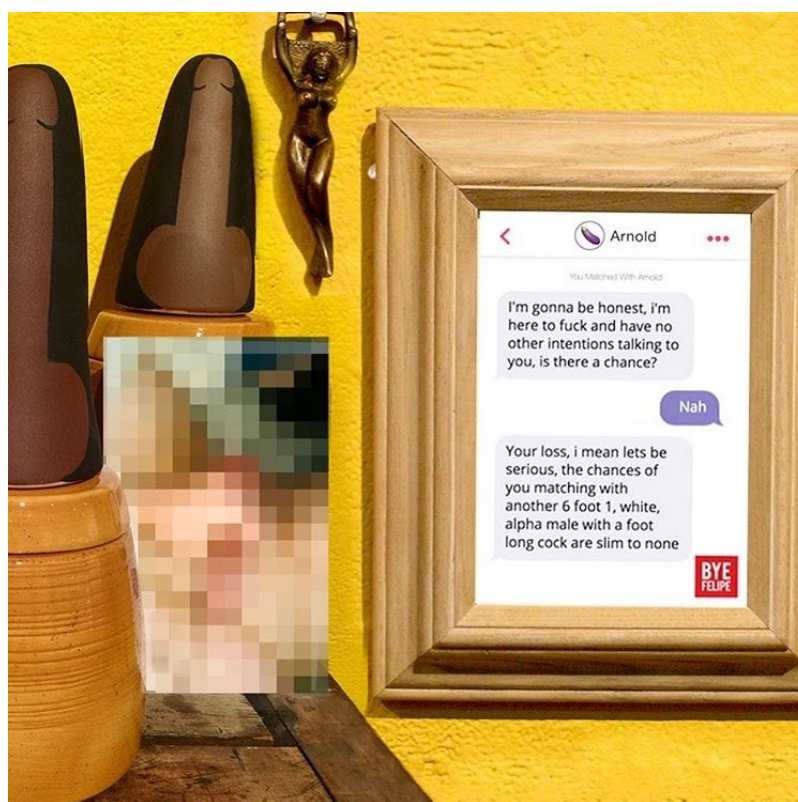


Fig. 43 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. Think Tank Gallery, Los Angeles.

¹³⁷ Bell 2017 [<https://www.thatdickpicshow.com/about>], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹³⁸ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 69, 71 and 82.

It could be argued that, although the men did not have consent to send the photos, Bell is violating their consent by moving the photos from a private to a public space and thus is a form of image-based sexual abuse, which can have long-term and considerable repercussions for those affected. However, in her use of a large number of (anonymous) images, Bell is not targeting individuals, but rather is attempting to expose the ubiquity of certain behaviours that society allows and justifies: the “pervasive dick-pic culture”, as termed by Sundén and Paasonen.¹³⁹ This is supported by Bell who explains that the exhibition is intended to “mirror my exhaustion with the constant harassment that women and femmes are expected to silently endure” and expose the normalisation of misogyny and open up dialogue rather than shame men.¹⁴⁰ This is evident in how the exhibition includes examples of online interactions and their artistic responses, which demonstrate a commonality of experiences amongst women and femmes. This functions as a form of consciousness-raising which presents online sexual harassment as part of a broader structural problem of male sexual entitlement and aggression rather than as isolated incidents or an inevitable risk of existing as a woman online. Indeed, Bell asserts that the nude pictures are “sent not to flirt or to entice, but to control. Because harassment isn’t about sex – it is about power”.¹⁴¹ This is furthered by Sundén and Paasonen who maintain that “by making assumedly private exchanges public, countershaming detaches the messaging from the personal – that is, from being about the individual woman in question – and helps to frame these exchanges as an issue of gendered routines and hierarchies”.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 96.

¹⁴⁰ Bell 2017 [<https://www.thatdickpicshow.com/about>], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹⁴¹ Bell 2017 [<https://www.thatdickpicshow.com/about>], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹⁴² Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 77.

Therefore, Bell is shifting the focus from the individual sender, receiver or encounter to the ubiquity of this shared experience and the structural problems that it entails, making the personal political. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Sundén and Paasonen, whilst dick pics can be experienced as violent and abusive, which is how they are predominantly understood, they may also be seen as arousing, amusing, ridiculous, irritating, inconvenient or boring by the receiver.¹⁴³ Sundén and Paasonen contend that “treating all unsolicited dick pics horizontally as signs of male violence and offense, without paying adequate attention to contextual detail, obscures the possible ambiguities and diverse intentions involved”, which I explore in more detail regarding the gender binary further on.¹⁴⁴

Notably, the role of consciousness-raising in the 1970s feminist art movement and second wave feminism more broadly was highly significant. For example, the Feminist Art Program used “consciousness-raising to elicit content”.¹⁴⁵ This was done through the sharing of personal experiences and group discussions which allowed students to “discover the commonality of our experiences as women and to analyse how we had been conditioned and formed on the basis of our gender”, as explained by Faith Wilding, thus placing individual experiences among shared experiences and then within social and political mechanisms of oppression; a direct application of “the personal is political”.¹⁴⁶ This is echoed in the development of online feminism which began in the form of websites and blogs, where women created spaces for themselves, which then developed into larger

¹⁴³ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 87-88.

¹⁴⁴ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 81.

¹⁴⁵ Wilding 1996, pp. 34-35.

¹⁴⁶ Wilding 1996, pp. 34-35. Wilding was a student of the Feminist Art Program.

communities of shared experience and dialogue, fulfilling the consciousness-raising role of small groups of women in private spaces during the second wave on a much larger and more public scale, most visibly through the use of hashtag activism, as explored in chapter three.¹⁴⁷ However, the act of sharing personal experiences in the context of online networked technologies differs from prior feminist waves in that it is public and visible to those outside of your immediate community and cannot be controlled or mapped once posted. It is open to infinite and faceless reactions and responses that can be supportive or violent and hostile, issues which Bell appears to be interrogating in *I Didn't Ask For This* through the display of online harassment and abuse.

Evidently, the shifting of online harassment into a gallery space draws on many issues relating to curatorial decisions and the role of the documentation and display of such experiences. The archiving and documentation of counter-narratives can help to challenge hegemonic narratives for the purpose of future education. For example, following the 2017 Women's March, archives and institutions were acquiring the placards to document contemporary protest as it was unfolding.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, feminists often utilise social media and digital technologies to document instances of gendered violence and harassment, as evidenced by Chalk Back, which I discussed in chapter three. Making oppression visible has always been central for feminism, so the visibility given to such articulations operates as a feminist cataloguing necessary to demonstrate structural problems.¹⁴⁹ Bell appears to be

¹⁴⁷ Martin and Valenti 2012, p. 6.

¹⁴⁸ Wiseman 24 January 2017 [<https://graziadaily.co.uk/life/real-life/museums-collecting-abandoned-signs-women-marches/>], accessed 4 February 2020.

¹⁴⁹ Mendes, Keller and Ringrose 2019, p. 1305.

extending the online feminist documentation of instances of sexual violence and misogyny, by documenting online experiences in offline spaces and using her online platform to amplify the discourse. Typically, online feminists document offline experiences on social media to demonstrate their ubiquity and pervasiveness, amplify them to a much wider audience and facilitate consciousness-raising. Meanwhile Bell's significant online presence and digital record of the exhibition allows the temporal and localised event to extend beyond its physical form into an online manifestation which can reach a much wider audience and achieve (unstable) permanence, with people able to access the exhibition regardless of geographical location and point in time, therefore further demonstrating the entanglement of online and offline spaces. Moreover, in a context in which gendered online abuse and harassment is so prevalent, Bell is pulling online behaviours into a public space to demonstrate their offline implications. Indeed, the sub-heading of the exhibition, *A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, reflects the ubiquity of such instances of sexual harassment over an extended period and how they infiltrate everyday life.

In 1972 *Womanhouse* transformed a suburban house in Hollywood into a site installation which used consciousness-raising to explore gender roles and expectations and women's experiences of the domestic sphere.¹⁵⁰ Bell, on the other hand, transforms a public arts space into a private domestic one, which alludes to invasion and the ways in which people live online, where the private, personal, public, online and offline are becoming increasingly blurred. Notably, *Womanhouse* also pursued the rupturing of the boundary between the

¹⁵⁰ *Womanhouse* attracted approximately 10,000 visitors during the period 30 January to 28 February 1972 and received unprecedented national attention when it was reviewed in *Time*.

public and private. Arlene Raven argues “*Womanhouse* turned the house inside out, thereby making the private public”, by bringing subject matters into the public sphere that previously remained in the shadows of suburban American homes.¹⁵¹ Yet the collapsing of the demarcations between the personal, private and public has accelerated due to the rise of social media and the entangling of the online and offline. This is evoked by the domestic space in *I Didn't Ask For This* referencing the visual language of social media in which the curation of furnishings encourages online circulation due to its aspirational and “instagrammable” nature. This is furthered by Rogan and Budgeon who assert that social media disturbs the traditionally gendered lines of the public and private by bringing public connectivity into the private domain.¹⁵² In this example, this manifests in the domestication of online harassment as well as how private (non-consensual) encounters and the domestic space are rendered public. Furthermore, Gosling, Robinson and Tobin highlight that it is becoming increasingly difficult to differentiate between the public and the private when people share traumas and personal information on social media that can be read by strangers.¹⁵³ In contrast to Molly Soda’s *Should I Send This?* (2015) in which she “released her own private, sexual pictures” as a “direct response to the culture of [publicly] shaming women through their private activity”, Bell plays on the blurring of the personal, private and public by visually displaying acts of digital sexual harassment in what resembles a private domestic space.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ Raven 1996, p. 48 and 61.

¹⁵² Rogan and Budgeon 2018, p. 9.

¹⁵³ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 202.

¹⁵⁴ Jansen 2017, p. 156.

By making the decision to furnish the gallery space as a recreation of her own apartment, Bell creates a jarring juxtaposition between the comforting domesticity and the unrelenting presence of the nude images that seem to engulf and trap her belongings.¹⁵⁵ As remarked by Katherine Brooks, “the dick pic is everywhere, a sinister reminder of sexual harassment’s gross ubiquity online”.¹⁵⁶ The images serve as a visual reminder of the presence of the often invisible and quasi-anonymous eyes that surveil and lurk, hidden in the social media aether, ready to bear down on women who dare to exist visibly online. Similar to *Womanhouse* and other related works, Bell reflects on the domestic space as a site of entrapment, using the immersive environment to create an unnerving proximity to these infiltrations.¹⁵⁷ The home-as-sanctuary is disturbed by the space being occupied by such images, reflecting the ways in which online abuse and harassment penetrates the offline sphere. Similarly, *Womanhouse* used space to create “immersive environments that recreated the suburban home as a nightmare”, as highlighted by Gosling, Robinson and Tobin.¹⁵⁸ All of this is furthered by Catherine Spencer who explains that feminist artists “explored the claustrophobia of traditional domestic arrangements, using their art to evoke feelings of alienation and dislocation”, which marked a “departure from associations of safety and security and

¹⁵⁵ Women artists bringing the domestic into the gallery has been a recurring practice, for example Tracy Emin’s *My Bed* (1999) and prior to that Hannah O’Shea’s *Hannah at Home* (1985), in which she moved her entire domestic surroundings into the gallery and conducted performances (Battista 2013, p. 154). Battista argues that “the resurgence of domestic subject matter into a public gallery space is testament to the notion that some aspects of a woman’s experience [...] are still considered unacceptable to the art viewing audience” (Battista 2013, p. 154).

¹⁵⁶ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9ElopO-lItXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7EybdgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹⁵⁷ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 99.

¹⁵⁸ Gosling, Robinson and Tobin 2019, p. 99.

instead, revealed a place that could be both boring and disturbing”.¹⁵⁹ The domesticity of the public gallery space in *I Didn't Ask For This* invites the audience to live with the images, becoming somewhat normalised in the context where the photos become merged with the cosy domestic space. The line between the everyday and violation is being manipulated to explore the commonality of such experiences. The use of the domestic setting also works to domesticate the dick pic, using the space to deprive it of its power and aggressive dominance. Meanwhile, humour is evoked through the images' absurdity within the space, despite the commonness of such acts of harassment, providing relief for the viewer and making such violation and discomfort lighter to bear. Therefore, the line between comfort and unease is constantly shifting in the space, with disembodied clothes hanging from the wall giving a sense of a former presence that is lost (fig. 44). These objects seem to signify the absence of a woman's body yet function as a substitute for the body itself, further intertwining the homely and the disturbing.

¹⁵⁹ Spencer 2019, p. 104.

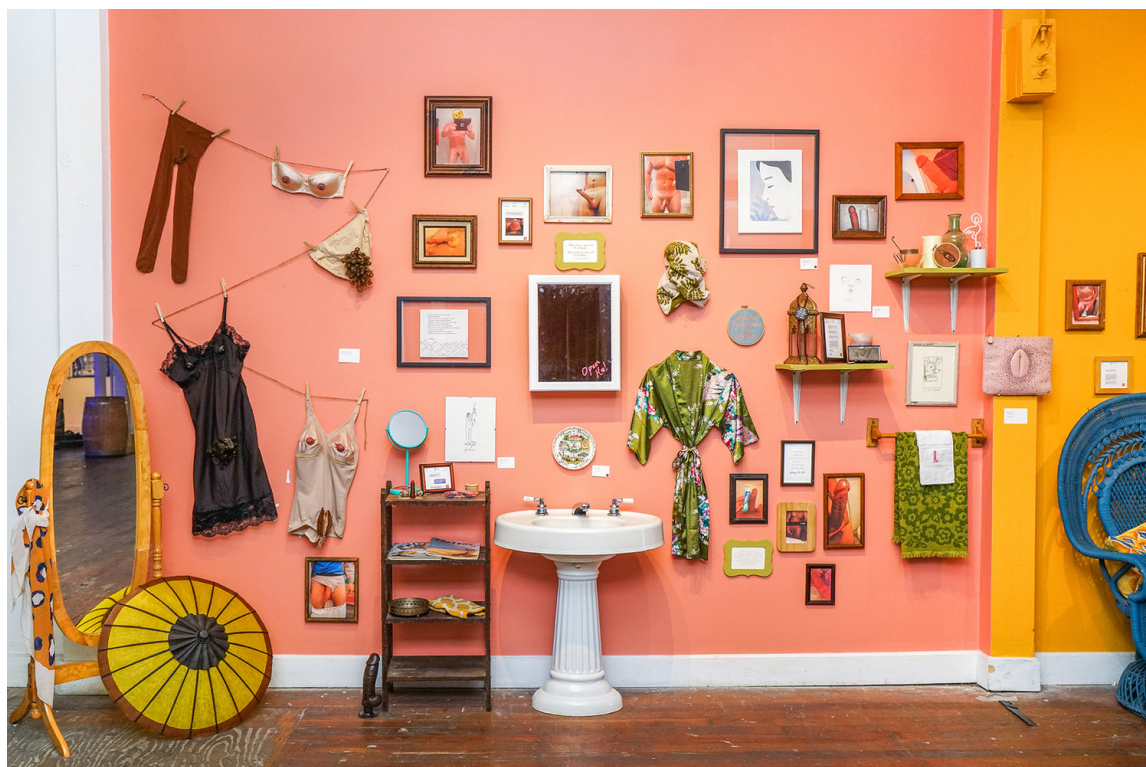


Fig. 44 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco.

The use of domesticity in *I Didn't Ask For This* also echoes a tactic that has precedence within feminist art, which is the connecting of domesticity and parody and subversion. Indeed, in problematising reductively essentialist readings of *Womanhouse*, Temma Balducci shows that, in particular rooms and performances, *Womanhouse* utilised parody and exaggeration as subversive tools to disrupt, undermine and deconstruct oppressive essentialist stereotypes, gender roles and patriarchal expectations that limited (white, middle-class and heterosexual) women both in the domestic and artistic realms, thereby complicating the essential versus constructed binary.¹⁶⁰ This use of parody and exaggeration sometimes had

¹⁶⁰ Balducci 2006, pp. 17-18 and 22. The artists involved in *Womanhouse* were predominantly white, middle-class and heterosexual. Therefore, despite attempting to speak for "woman", their definition was limited by their biases and experiences and their work is a product of that positioning, voicing concerns related to it and critiquing societal expectations about such women, as highlighted by Balducci (Balducci 2006, pp. 18 and 22). This somewhat resulted in the exclusion of more marginalised women. For example, Raven demonstrates that

humorous results, an aspect of *Womanhouse* which is often overlooked. For example, the performance *Cock and Cunt*, written by Chicago and performed by Janice Lester and Faith Wilding, had two characters engaging in dialogue, identified by their “comically outsized genitalia”.¹⁶¹ This piece parodies the construction of traditional gender roles based on biological differences, highlighting both their pervasiveness and absurdity. Balducci explain that, in part of the dialogue:

‘He’ uses the woman’s lack of a penis as a justification for her having to wash the dishes, ‘She’ points out that this requirement is not specifically written on her body. ‘He’ then concocts pseudo-scientific reasoning to support this claim, thus attempting to naturalise it: ‘round = dish,’ ‘long = missile’.¹⁶²

Therefore, the female body is “expressly invoked as a site that allows for the oppressive positioning of women as domestic workers” and used as “parodic disruption of gender expectations [and stereotypes] rather than for essentialising purposes”, as argued by Balducci.¹⁶³ This demonstrates how parody can be employed as a powerful feminist tool that radically disrupts the reproduction of structural oppressions which dictate the behaviour of women, whilst generating laughter as a way to collectively mock such expectations and stereotypes, removing them of their power by revealing their absurdity. However, the humour was starkly interrupted at the end of the performance when “He” tore off his penis and beat “She” to death for demanding sexual pleasure.¹⁶⁴ This reveals how humour and subversion can be unstable and volatile, used to unsettle and disturb the viewer.

“lesbians in the Feminist Art Program did not find rooms of their own in which to express their sexuality, much less their sexual practice” (Raven 1996, p. 63).

¹⁶¹ Balducci 2006, p. 18.

¹⁶² Balducci 2006, p. 19.

¹⁶³ Balducci 2006, pp. 19 and 22.

¹⁶⁴ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 90.

Balducci maintains that “*Womanhouse* helped lay the groundwork for the exploration of gender construction through parody and exaggeration that continues to be important for feminist art”.¹⁶⁵ Whilst Bell does not address issues pertaining to domestic labour, she does seek to deconstruct gender roles by invoking the penis as a site of male sexual entitlement and domination, whilst challenging expected feminine receptivity and passivity by calling out online sexual harassment and seeking to empower victims. Evidently, *Womanhouse* used subversive tools of parody to undermine, disrupt and expose the absurdity and pervasiveness of biological essentialism, gender roles and patriarchal expectations that govern the domestic space. Similarly, Bell uses comparable subversive tactics to reveal the absurdity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of online sexual harassment, employing the domestic space as a site of infiltration, (dis)comfort and (online) encounter. Bell also involves other women artists in the exhibition to explore “the female condition”, the responses to which are evidently tied to particular gendered experiences, similar to the works that emerged out of consciousness-raising for *Womanhouse*.¹⁶⁶ Also, *I Didn’t Ask For This* functions as a form of consciousness-raising for visitors by demonstrating how acts of sexual harassment are tied to broader conditions of power and structural oppressions, rather than being isolated or individual experiences. Moreover, events including panels and workshops took place within *I Didn’t Ask For This*, largely exploring issues around sex positivity, consent and feminism, to educate, create dialogue and raise awareness.

¹⁶⁵ Balducci 2006, p. 22.

¹⁶⁶ Like the collaboration of *Womanhouse*, Bell works with and involves other artists. However, unlike *Womanhouse*, *I Didn’t Ask For This* is a single-authored work.

Domestic settings were a significant part of feminist artists' use of alternative spaces within the 1970s feminist art movement, which operated outside of patriarchal structures as a way to subvert the hegemony of exclusionary and repressive mainstream and commercial art institutions.¹⁶⁷ Through the creation of such spaces women artists sought to protest their exclusion from mainstream galleries and demonstrate the high standard of their work, thus putting pressure onto institutions to include them.¹⁶⁸ Despite the problems and criticisms of such alternative spaces in the 1970s, they provided women with support structures to overcome artistic isolation, pragmatic skills for their career development and the opportunity for visibility by presenting their work to sympathetic audiences.¹⁶⁹ They also allowed women artists to evade restrictions placed on them by commercial galleries and show work about taboo issues that would have been deemed unacceptable to mainstream institutions.¹⁷⁰ Bell's echoing of alternative spaces allows her to display artworks and images that are heavily censored on social media and perhaps would not be permitted to be shown

¹⁶⁷ This was intertwined with the rise of ephemeral and performative art practices that operated beyond the confines of mainstream and commercial art institutions and reacted against the commercialisation and commodification of art. Battista identifies three essential types of alternative space: alternative art spaces; alternative public sites; and domestic settings (Battista 2013, p. 18). She also regards journals and publications, such as *Red Rag*, *Shrew*, *FAN (Feminist Art News)*, *Spare Rib* and *WIRES*, as another form of alternative site for feminist activism and art, functioning as a discursive space for engagement, exchanges, connection and networking and a way to learn about women's work and issues, politics, alternative art projects, public demonstrations and events (Battista 2013, pp. 17, 93 and 133).

¹⁶⁸ Brodsky 1996, p. 104.

¹⁶⁹ Brodsky 1996, p. 104; Battista 2013, p. 92. Alternative spaces were unsustainable and precarious because there were internal conflicts and division, they were non-hierarchical, so were often left without leadership and they lacked funding and were often on the edge of financial collapse with women having to pour in their own resources, thus the spaces often closed after short amounts of time. (Brodsky 1996) Furthermore, they were often criticised for further excluding, isolating, marginalising and ghettoising women artists and failing to challenge the *status quo* and power and dominance of mainstream and commercial art institutions, thus potentially allowing them to continue with their exclusionary practices. All of this is supported by Battista who suggests that in moving away from patriarchal institutions, women artists also moved away from visibility, remuneration, documentation, archiving, conservation and acclaim, thus risking erasure (Battista 2013, p. 18).

¹⁷⁰ Brodsky 1996, p. 104; Battista 2013, pp. 124-25.

in mainstream art institutions. Moreover, during the 1970s, panels, discussions, classes and education programmes that were set up in conjunction with alternative spaces and exhibitions provided the space for dialogue, connection and sharing, an aspect of alternative feminist spaces that Bell clearly reproduces in the event programme surrounding *I Didn't Ask For This*.¹⁷¹ All of this demonstrates that feminism is still reliant on alternative spaces despite assertions to the contrary, as argued in the introduction.¹⁷²

In *I Didn't Ask For This*, the nude images are displayed alongside feminist items that Bell possesses, which creates an unsettling juxtaposition, suggesting that Bell is making comments on her own feminist subjectivity. For example, Bell's copy of *Bad Feminist* by Gay is surrounded by nude images (fig. 45), which could be read as a comment on her own imperfections and contradictions as a feminist or accusations made against her for her outspokenness online.¹⁷³ Alternatively, the book, as well as the feminist artworks and objects, could serve as feminist reminders that penetrate their entrapment by the nude images. Indeed, Ahmed recommends in her "Killjoy Survival Kit" surrounding oneself with feminism and feminist things and objects to create a "feminist horizon around you" which serve as reminders of a feminist life, "connections, shared struggles, shared lives" and "why you are doing what you are doing", to help one handle what they come up against, which in this instance is online sexual harassment.¹⁷⁴ However, the placement of the artworks by women artists makes the objects compete for visibility alongside the domineering,

¹⁷¹ Brodsky 1996, p. 104.

¹⁷² For example, Cottingham 1996, p. 284.

¹⁷³ Gay embraces the label of "bad feminist" to account for flaws and contradictions (Gay 2014, p. x).

¹⁷⁴ Ahmed 2017, p. 241.

aggressive and somewhat absurd and humorous nature of the nude photos. Yet many of the artworks explore the misogyny that women face both online and offline, thus perhaps developing the core intentions of the exhibition. One grouping of objects which seems to be playing on these types of interactions that women experience is shown in fig. 46. The arrangement consists of a dick pic, a line drawing of a woman defiantly holding up her middle finger over her nipple and two plates with the phrases “P.M.S.” and “Horny?”, which may be used by men in interactions to objectify and vilify women. But perhaps it is also an attempt to reclaim and redefine the words through the delicacy and femininity of the ceramics and floral decoration (which could be perceived as a nod to Chicago’s 1974-79 work *The Dinner Party*). This arrangement of objects appears to be replicating an interaction in which a woman defiantly rejects the advances of a man online, only to be met with a barrage of objectifying and misogynistic language, similar to what Bye Felipe exposes, reflecting the contemporary battle between feminisms and anti-feminisms, especially online, as explored in chapter two.



Fig. 45 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco.



Fig. 46 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco.

Brooks argues that the framing of the images evokes the feeling of when a picture arrives, infiltrating your home and making you feel unsafe.¹⁷⁵ Whilst I agree that the exhibition provokes an unnerving sense of infiltration, this comes from the sheer number of images and the curatorial juxtaposition between them and the domestic furnishings, feminist objects and artworks. The framing of the images elevates the dick pics to an art-like status or that the sender intended them to be seen as such, as exemplified by the aesthetic choices in some of the photographs. This pulls pornographic images and acts of sexual harassment into the art world, thereby inviting aesthetic and artistic judgement, an idea which initially sparked the creation of this exhibition.¹⁷⁶ Nead asserts that the frame “is a metaphor for the ‘staging’ of art [...] marking the limit between art and non-art, that is, obscenity” and thus beyond representation.¹⁷⁷ Therefore, Bell places the obscene within the confines of the frame, blurring the lines between art and non-art or obscenity. Meanwhile, most of the works by the female artists are notably not within frames, as many of them are craft objects, which historically have been associated with the feminine and separated from the realms of “high art”. As such, perhaps the nude photographs are situated in an elevated hierarchical position due to their treatment as artworks. Indeed, the salon-style arrangement of the images appears to be evoking the display style of traditional art galleries, such as the Royal Academy in the nineteenth-century, in which artworks are displayed above and below one

¹⁷⁵ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9ElopcO-lltXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7Eyb-dgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Bell 2017 [<https://www.thatdickpicshow.com/about>], accessed 22 January 2020.

¹⁷⁷ Nead 1992, p. 25.

another in close proximity, which invites a particular viewing experience. The framing and arrangement also transform the male senders into anonymous artists, nodding to, yet also mocking, the trope of the artistic (male) genius, that the Guerrilla Girls also sought to challenge and subvert and its connection to male sexuality and sexual potency, which Benglis satirised. However, the framing of the photographs also appears to contain and regulate them, preventing them from escaping the confines of the frame and removing their power for the purposes of empowering and giving autonomy to victims of sexual harassment.

The satirisation of male artistic genius and its connection with the penis in *I Didn't Ask For This* is also evident in *Dollhouse* by Sherry Brody and Miriam Schapiro, which was part of *Womanhouse* (fig. 47). *Dollhouse*, like *Womanhouse*, addresses the construction of gender and subverts the perpetuation and reinforcement of traditional gender roles by dollhouses through parody.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, *Dollhouse* can be seen as symbolic of the broader site, alluding to the “use of play found throughout the project – the dressing up and role-playing that are at the core of the parody and exaggeration in *Womanhouse*”, as argued by Balducci, which was also evident in *Cock and Cunt*.¹⁷⁹ In the upper-right of *Dollhouse*, there is an artist's studio with a nude male model-like figure stood on a pedestal with an erect penis and a tray of bananas at his feet, echoing Nochlin's *Achetez des Bananes*, which I discuss in more detail further on, and as such references the portrayal of women throughout the history of Western art. Similar to works like Benglis' *Artforum* advertisement, which I discussed in the

¹⁷⁸ Balducci 2006, p. 20

¹⁷⁹ Balducci 2006, p. 20.

previous chapter, the male model's erect penis suggests a humorous inversion and parody of the connection between artistic creativity and male sexuality and sexual potency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, which is further exaggerated by the figure's solitary presence and the absence of an artist in the studio, as highlighted by Balducci.¹⁸⁰ According to Balducci, this is underscored by the easel on the right-hand side of the room which displays a miniature version of Schapiro's *Sixteen Windows* (1965), which, due to its minimalist grid-like structure, echoes the then predominant style in the male dominated art world, perhaps indicating Schapiro's decision not to make the room a female space.¹⁸¹ Similarly, the male figure's upright stance, presence at the top of the house and the fact that he is one of only two figures results in him dominating not only the artistic realm but also the entire domestic space. This is furthered by Balducci who suggests that "by satirising the exalted status of the male artist through exaggeration and parody, the artist's studio is a reminder to the viewer about the place of women in both the artistic and domestic realms – all but absent in one and diminished in the other".¹⁸² Both *Dollhouse* and *I Didn't Ask For This* use the arrangement and positioning of the male nude(s) within the overall space to simultaneously reference, mock, parody and subvert the connection between male sexuality and the male artistic genius, whilst also invoking the domestic space as a site of oppression.

¹⁸⁰ Balducci 2006, pp. 20-21.

¹⁸¹ Balducci 2006, p. 21.

¹⁸² Balducci 2006, p. 21.



Fig. 47 Miriam Schapiro and Shelly Brody, *Dollhouse*, 1972, wood and mixed media, 202.6 x 208.3 x 21.6 cm. Smithsonian American art Museum, Washington DC.

Bell also inverts art historical conventions and tropes of the female nude by applying them to depictions of the naked male body, continuing a prominent feminist art practice. This serves as a vehicle of subversion which exposes the naturalisation of the naked female body and the perceived absurdities of the male nude, drawing on the complexities and

ambivalences of the female gaze. Nochlin maintains that depictions of the sexual control of female bodies are a product of the society which grants it permission, whereas in *I Didn't Ask For This*, the display of the male nude represents sexual harassment as a product of a society which permits it.¹⁸³ Moreover, as previously mentioned, Nead argues that the containment and regulation of the female sexual body is one of the central goals of the female nude.¹⁸⁴ In this sense, it can be seen that Bell is trying to control and regulate the male body in order to discipline its actions, reversing what has been done to women throughout Western Art History. Nochlin demonstrates that in the male representation of the female nude “the very notion of the originary power of the artist, his status as creator of unique and valuable objects, is founded on a discourse of gender difference as power”.¹⁸⁵ But, in the exhibition, the male remains the creator of the image, in control of the production of his own self-image and presumably seeking gratification by sending such images non-consensually to women. Therefore, gendered power structures remain evident, demonstrating that straightforward inversions of art historical conventions and tropes are not possible.

Nevertheless, the dick pics are fragmented and anonymised, so they are denied their identity and wholeness, conventions which are almost never applied to the male nude, but are often used against the female nude for the purposes of objectification, degradation, exploitation and mutilation.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, the framing of the images furthers this dramatic cropping and fragmentation, reducing a body to its parts, echoing Courbet's *L'Origine du*

¹⁸³ Nochlin 1989, p. 10.

¹⁸⁴ Nead 1992, p. 6.

¹⁸⁵ Nochlin 1989, p. 17.

¹⁸⁶ Saunders 1989, pp. 71-74.

Monde in which the focus of the work is the model's genitals, which I discussed in the previous chapter.¹⁸⁷ The disabling or distorting of the female nude typically indicates fear of "women's autonomous uncontrolled sexuality", as highlighted by Saunders, whereas Bell's display of the male nude evokes the anxiety held amongst women of the unregulated sexual entitlement of men.¹⁸⁸ Furthermore, Saunders suggests that images of the female nude by men in Western Art History are often emptied of the woman's experience as an expression of the artist's sexuality, thus alienating the women from their own images.¹⁸⁹ Here, the male nude symbolises male sexuality in relation to sexual entitlement and harassment in a society which normalises and justifies such behaviour. The men are emptied of their experience and alienated from their image for the purpose of demonstrating the ubiquity, pervasiveness and quasi-anonymity of such behaviours, yet they do not appear vulnerable in the same way as female nudes often do.

As indicated before, the inversion of tropes and conventions of the nude as a mode of subversion, which often results in humour, has long been a tactic within feminist visual culture. In 1972 at the College Art Association conference in San Francisco, Nochlin's introductory remarks at a panel entitled 'Eroticism and the Image of the Woman in 19th Century Art' included a reversal of *Achetez des Pommes* to create *Achetez des Bananes* for a slide comparison (fig. 48). Richard Meyer advocates that "Nochlin's slide comparison forces viewers to rethink the naturalisation of the female nude by comically subjecting the male

¹⁸⁷ However, it is unclear as to whether Bell cropped the photographs for the purposes of the exhibition or whether the original versions are that which are on display.

¹⁸⁸ Saunders 1989, p. 73.

¹⁸⁹ Saunders 1989, p. 117.

body to ‘equal opportunity’ objectification”.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, this humorous reversal reveals the extent to which the female nude is naturalised due to how images of the male nude evoke a different response. But this incongruence complicates the very notion of reverse objectification. By reversing conventions and tropes of the female nude, both Nochlin and Bell are challenging the audience’s preconceived expectations of the nude, revealing how laughter is a response for the male but not the female due to the sexualisation, naturalisation and oversaturation of the naked female body.



Fig. 48 Left: Unknown, *Achetez des Pommes*, circa 1890, photograph. Right: Linda Nochlin, *Achetez des Bananes*, 1972, photograph. University of Pennsylvania Fine Arts Library Image Collection, Pennsylvania.

¹⁹⁰ Meyer 2007, p. 370.

Furthermore, the discourse surrounding objectification and sexualisation often centres on the bifurcation of the male gaze and the female being gazed upon, in which female agency is denied and embodied female looking is neglected. Therefore, when it is seemingly reversed and women become active gazers and men are gazed upon, as in *I Didn't Ask For This*, it can become difficult to perceive it beyond this gendered binary, as if the only way to look at another naked human being is how cisgender heterosexual men supposedly objectify and sexualise women, which can result in reductive and simplified discussions that revolve around the idea of reverse objectification. Indeed, Bell is not simply subjecting those photos to objectification by the female gaze, although this may occur. It is a critique of the ubiquity and pervasiveness of sexual harassment particularly within digital spaces and how this infiltrates the private domestic space. The notion of reverse objectification is further complicated by the fact that such unsolicited photos are sent because the female receivers are being objectified by the male sender for their own sexual fantasies. The title of the exhibition, *I Didn't Ask For This*, underlines the non-consensual nature of such online interactions. Bell, rather than making men subject to objectification, is provoking empowerment through the subversion of the degradation that women experience when such unsolicited photos are sent. Similarly, some of the artworks included in the exhibition by women artists are of the female nude, thus they are claiming autonomy over their own representation and sexuality, alongside their experiences of harassment, in a space which rejects the male gaze. By subverting and rejecting the male gaze, Bell attempts to transform women into active, agentic and empowered viewers and the male nude becomes subject to the complexities of female looking.

However, the censoring of the exhibition's dick pics on social media and in news media articles restricts the agency that Bell intends to provide. Also, it is ironic that the images women have received without their consent have to be censored in the public realm.

Notably, during the 1970s feminist art movement in the US, women artists who depicted the eroticised male nude were subject to various forms of censorship, including exclusion from exhibitions and gallery spaces.¹⁹¹ Despite the level of attention that *I Didn't Ask For This* received, the images are heavily blurred in news articles and on social media. Therefore, the spaces where she did not experience censorship were the ones she created, such as the gallery space and her website, sites which operate as alternatives outside of the mainstream. As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1973 Anita Steckel founded the Fight Censorship group for female artists who produce some form of sexually explicit art, demanding that such work by women not be excluded by museums, as well as challenging the double standard of the display of the female nude but not the male.¹⁹² Furthermore, the Fight Censorship group sought to respond "to the broader social conditions that render men the primary agents and women the objects of both sexual and artistic authority", with women artists "gendering and sexualising the male body rather than allowing it to stand in as the sign of a universal subject", such as works by Sleight who faced backlash and attempts at exclusion from gallery spaces due to her representations of the male nude.¹⁹³ As such, the censorship and backlash that Bell experienced demonstrates the continuation of these longstanding issues and challenges that still affect women artists.

¹⁹¹ Meyer 2007, p. 363.

¹⁹² Meyer 2007, p. 366.

¹⁹³ Meyer 2007, pp. 374 and 382.

Another second wave example which inverts visual and sexual expectations is the 1972 advertisement for the Brooklyn Museum Art School, in which the class of artists are naked and facing the viewer, while the female life model is fully clothed and has her back to the viewer (fig. 49). Notably, Meyer argues that exploiting the logic of these forms of reversal in images like *Achetez des Bananes* and the advertisement creates a comical, novelty and parody image, but does not address the question of how the male nude may be reconceived by feminist artists as an expression of their desire rather than a joke or reinforcement of phallic domination.¹⁹⁴ However, as I explore in relation to *I Didn't Ask For This* further on, these notions are not mutually exclusive and possess a complex and ambivalent relationship.

¹⁹⁴ Meyer 2007, p. 371.

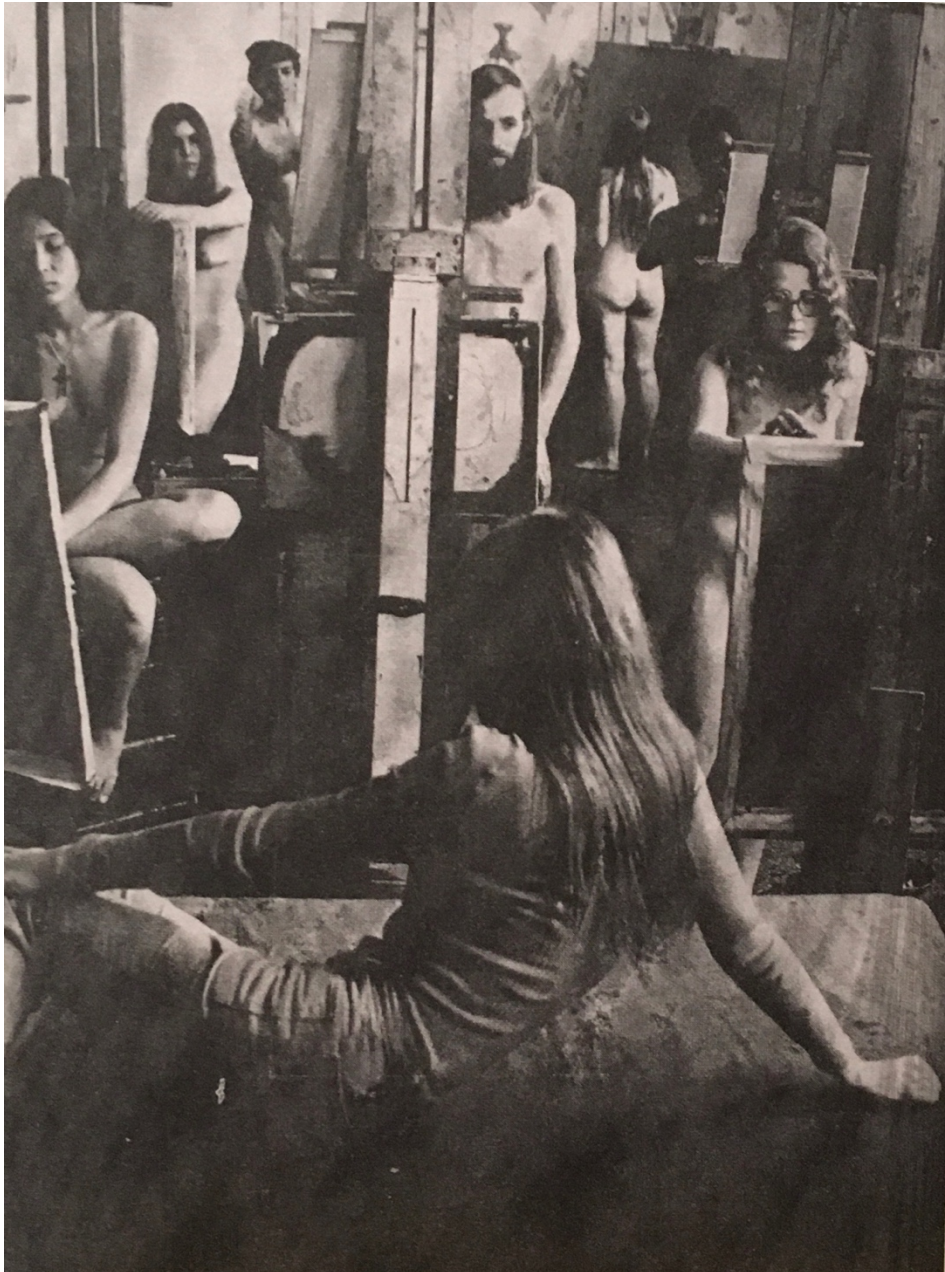


Fig. 49 *Arts Magazine* advertisement for Brooklyn Museum Art School, 1972.

Sleigh (re)appropriates paintings and themes from the history of Western art in her depictions of the male nude as both a form of satirisation and an expression of female agency and sexuality. For example, in *Imperial Nude* (fig. 50) the male nude is reclined but his body is open and on display to visual consumption. He looks off to the side as if to avoid confronting the gaze of the viewer looking at his unobstructed body. Semmel and Kingsley

assert that in the work of artists like Sleigh the male nude is used as a vehicle to express erotic feelings, just as male artists have used the female nude, thus it is both an expression of feminist critique and female desire.¹⁹⁵ As highlighted by Meyer, rather than depicting the phallus as intrinsically oppressive of women, some female artists sought to reimagine the male nude, exploring and playing on the ambivalent relationship between heterosexual female desire and feminist critique, presenting them as not mutually exclusive.¹⁹⁶ The inversion of artistic conventions and sexual expectations is no more evident than in *Philip Golub Reclining* in which Sleigh “upended the male artist/female model representation by painting herself upright at the easel in the background and her male model reclining across the foreground”, as highlighted by Borzello, with the male figure also gazing at and admiring his own reflection (fig. 51).¹⁹⁷ This is echoed by Bell in the ways in which she gestures to and mocks how the male senders perhaps saw their images and bodies as works of art. Frueh explains that Sleigh appropriates tropes and paintings from Western Art History, replacing a female figure with a male figure, not just for satire but also to humanise the nude, which is evident in how the figures are highly individualised and are often of men in her life whom she desired or admired.¹⁹⁸ She treats the bodies with a softness, tenderness and attention to detail which demonstrates a, perhaps sensual, exploration of the somewhat vulnerable male body.¹⁹⁹ Indeed, *The Turkish Bath* (fig. 52), which directly references Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’ painting of the same name (fig. 53), includes her husband Lawrence

¹⁹⁵ Semmel and Kingsley 1980, p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ Meyer 2007, p. 382.

¹⁹⁷ Borzello 1998, p. 184.

¹⁹⁸ Frueh 1996, p. 201.

¹⁹⁹ Semmel and Kingsley 1980, p. 4.

Alloway (the reclining figure on the right-hand side), who returns the gaze of Sleight and the audience.



Fig. 50 Sylvia Sleight, *Imperial Nude*, 1977, oil on canvas, 106 x 152 cm.



Fig. 51 Sylvia Sleight, *Philip Golub Reclining*, 1971, oil on canvas, 106.7 x 157.5 cm. Private Collection, Dallas, Texas.



Fig. 52 Sylvia Sleigh, *The Turkish Bath*, 1973, oil on canvas. Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago.

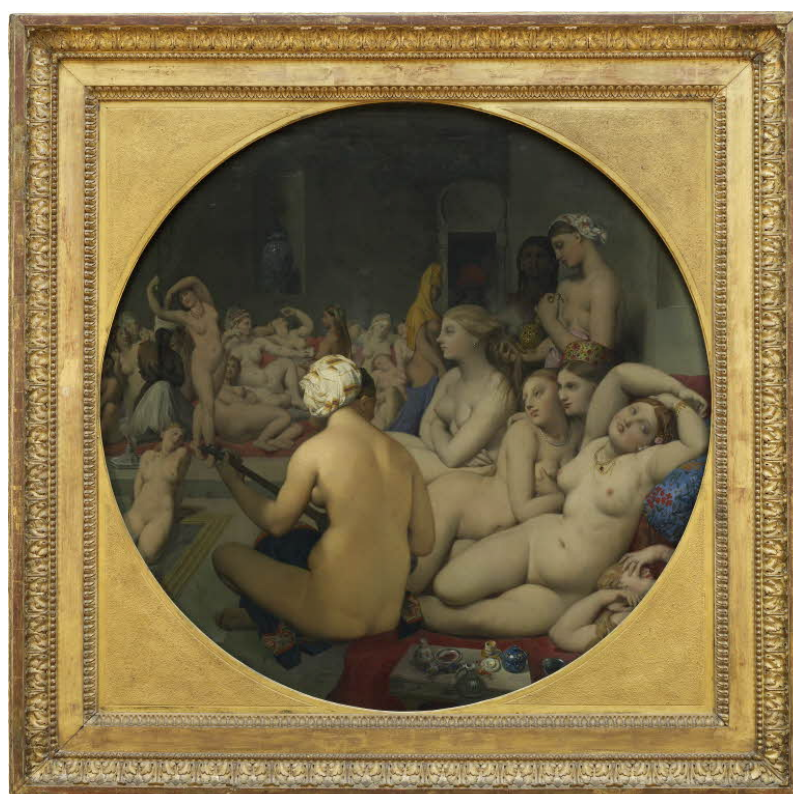


Fig. 53 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Turkish Bath*, 1852-59, modified in 1862, oil on canvas glued to wood, 108 cm x 110 cm. Louvre, Paris.

Women artists explore phallic imagery to both “critique male supremacy and to claim the male body as a site of female fantasy and desire”, which serves as a counterpart to the vaginal imagery which 1970s feminist art is most often remembered for, as maintained by Meyer.²⁰⁰ By placing male sexual entitlement on full display, thereby subverting the omnipresence of the male gaze and heterosexual male fantasies, Bell brings to the foreground the complexities and ambivalences of the female gaze, one which neither prioritises nor rejects fantasy and desire. Notably, Bell acknowledges that the idea for the exhibition came from receiving an unsolicited dick pic that she experienced visual pleasure from.²⁰¹ Therefore, Bell is consciously manipulating the ambivalent relationship between feminist critique and sexual desire and exploring its contradictions, presenting something far more complex than a straightforward reversal of objectification.

However, despite their subversiveness and troubling of the binary of the active male gaze and the passive female subject, the gender binary is somewhat reinforced across these works. The subversion in *I Didn't Ask For This* and Nochlin and Sleight's depictions rely on the gender binary being read through nude bodies, that penis equals male, excluding the possibility of bodies which do not conform to the gender or sex binary. Moreover, *I Didn't Ask For This* reinforces the binary framework in which men are active senders of unsolicited nude images, whilst women are passive receivers and victims. Indeed, Sundén and Paasonen convey that public discussion of unsolicited nudes is predominantly straight which excludes interactions between transgender and queer bodies which may be more playful or

²⁰⁰ Meyer 2007, p. 368.

²⁰¹ Bell 2017 [<https://www.thatdickpicshow.com/about>], accessed 22 January 2020.

ambiguous, also such image practices are more complex than gender binaries like active and passive are able to embrace.²⁰² Nevertheless, by indicating the ways in which dick pics can be experienced as violating, exhausting, humorous and pleasurable, Bell opens the complexities and ambiguities surrounding unsolicited nude images. Furthermore, by publicly displaying such images, Bell renders the male senders passive and silent and the female receivers active and agentic by giving them the space to respond to, including collectively laugh at, such harassment.

Moorti asserts that “humour can shift away or disrupt patriarchal language and move towards a language in which women (as themselves or as a class) can speak”.²⁰³ In the exhibition, this is evident in the incorporation of works by female artists and the events programme that was organised as a way to educate and open up dialogue. Bell is not employing humour to make feminism more palatable, safe or appealing but as a form of consciousness-raising, empowerment, community-building and connective action in the face of sexual harassment. This demonstrates how feminist laughter operates not just by “preaching to the converted” but reconverting the converted by “reinforcing a sense of community belonging and socio-political affinity through the affirmation function of political humour, which also disrupts the silencing of feminist expression online by trolls and other misogynists”, as suggested by Rentschler and Thrift.²⁰⁴

²⁰² Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 86-87.

²⁰³ Moorti 2018, p. 119.

²⁰⁴ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 340.

The display of dick pics and hostile interactions with men in the exhibition become humorous, in part, because they are recognisable as a shared experience amongst women. The commonality of experiences exhibited in this collection provides familiar recognition in which women are given the space to laugh collectively in response to the absurdity of such harassment. Indeed, Bell remarks that the absurdity of the entire collection becomes comical.²⁰⁵ In this sense, it could be argued that Bell is making light of the pervasiveness of online harassment. However, Bell's awareness of the absurdity is evident in this exhibition, making the comedic value work effectively for activist purposes. Also, the images are removed from their original context and positioned in a gallery space where they no longer seem as threatening, as if their recontextualisation has removed their power, providing relief and making such experiences lighter to bear. Another example of this is the stained-glass panel, positioned in the centre of the bedroom directly above the bed frame, depicting a man holding his penis (fig. 54). By merging the imagery of unsolicited nude photos with religious connotations, the artist appears to be parodying ideas of worship and self-perceived omnipotence of the senders, thereby (re)appropriating and subverting the entitlement evident within such interactions, transforming it into something humorous, playful and satirical.

²⁰⁵ Brooks 9 June 2017 [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/dick-pics-art-whitney-bell_n_59399965e4b0c5a35c9d654c?ri18n=true&guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cudGhhdGRpY2twaWNzaG93LmNvbS9wcmVzcy8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAALLs7ZYV3tFJQd43SjDSzcWNYpeaH_1BsRZuvm9ElopcO-lltXrhqFzKyZMoCEk7q-xk-yuAmCY8VP7VV7Eyb-dgBSUrefuQispserA_IsMOz1RI2iml3djqtKBYKJ6K6nwpqkk3qlxv_5G1nOE3FR8J6jXabxgA7C8g9cRPe2Ng], accessed 22 January 2020.



Fig. 54 Whitney Bell, *I Didn't Ask For This: A Lifetime of Dick Pics*, 2016-17, installation view. SOMArts Cultural Center, San Francisco.

Furthermore, the mobilisation of laughter that energises feminisms garners broader media attention and thus transforms the discourse on feminism and misogyny.²⁰⁶ This is evident in the significant amount of media attention that the exhibition received both in the US and UK and, whilst this is probably in part due to the shocking nature of the content, it certainly is effective in opening dialogue surrounding the ubiquity and pervasiveness of online harassment. But there is certainly a significant level of privilege needed to create this kind of response to online sexual harassment. Whilst Bell alludes to this in the poster which reads “Empowerment is a Privilege: Make Sure You Share Yours” (fig. 42), the exhibition does not address the ways in which many women, particularly those who experience intersecting

²⁰⁶ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 335.

oppressions, are silenced by this form of abuse and are unable to speak out, an issue I explored in relation to #MeToo in chapter three.

Whilst irony and wit can be used to expose inequality, it can also be misinterpreted or used to reinforce the sexist and divisive discourse that it seeks to challenge.²⁰⁷ This is evident in the accusations of “revenge porn” made against Bell. However, accusations of “revenge porn” charged against Bell reflect the popular misogyny-fuelled notion that white men have been injured or are under threat by feminism or a form of reverse discrimination or oppression which positions white men as the victims (Banet-Weiser terms this the “funhouse mirror”).²⁰⁸ This in turn somewhat reveals the extent to which such acts of online harassment and abuse are driven by wanting to regain control and power in response to their purported injuries and imagined injustices.²⁰⁹ Furthermore, Bell appears to be playing on certain arguments anti-feminists often use to discredit feminists. Indeed, Lawrence and Ringrose assert that male supremacy can be antagonised by playing on the man-hating stereotype.²¹⁰ They also note that the use of misandry is now being used as comedic vehicle by feminists, working “to decentre male comfort and refute notions of women being accommodating and passive by simply tolerating instances of sexism”, issues which I explore in more detail in relation to the figure of the feminist killjoy further on.²¹¹ Bell has created a realm in which roles are reversed and men become subject to the female gaze with women

²⁰⁷ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 214.

²⁰⁸ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 35 and 39.

²⁰⁹ Banet-Weiser 2018, pp. 84-85.

²¹⁰ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 226.

²¹¹ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 223.

in a position of power over the anonymous and fragmented images, thereby destabilising the male gaze and disturbing male comfort and sexual entitlement by playing on the stereotype of man-hating feminists. As such, misandry can be used as a tool to expose how women are accused of misandry, when it is actually the result of misogyny and experiences of sexism.²¹²

The presence of laughter and joy do not negate feelings of anger or frustration, instead they can overlap and intersect. Indeed, Sundén and Paasonen highlight that “the laugh can be a vehicle for contempt”.²¹³ 2017, one of the years in which *I Didn't Ask For This* was on public display, has been characterised as the “Year of Women’s Anger” marked by the Women’s March on the 21 January (of which Bell is an outspoken critic due to its centralisation of whiteness and white feminism) and #MeToo.²¹⁴ Phipps contends that 2017 can be deemed a year of release; a moment of “feminist snap”, a term she borrows from Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), which occurs “when we are fed up with negotiating worlds that demean and exclude us”.²¹⁵ She furthers this by regarding the Women’s March and #MeToo as moments of “collective snap”, consisting of “outpourings from women and people of other genders who came together in common anger and resistance”.²¹⁶ Although Bell’s exhibition is not seemingly fuelled solely by anger or rage, it does appear to echo Ahmed’s figure of the

²¹² Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 224.

²¹³ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 13.

²¹⁴ Phipps 2020, p. 110.

²¹⁵ Phipps 2020, p. 110; Ahmed 2017.

²¹⁶ Phipps 2020, p. 111. Phipps goes onto discuss the relationship between white women’s anger and racialised and classed dynamics and the implications of this.

feminist killjoy, which draws on the intersections between humour, anger, joy and killing joy.²¹⁷

In particular, I am interested in the positive affective potentialities of the figure of the feminist killjoy, especially Ahmed's points that "we need joy to survive killing joy" and "there can be joy in finding killjoys; there can be joy in killing joy" and how these can manifest in feminist artistic and visual practices.²¹⁸ In *I Didn't Ask For This*, the joy in killing (male) joy emerges from disturbing the comfort of male sexual entitlement within rape culture by publicly displaying dick pics, thereby demonstrating a willingness to cause unhappiness.²¹⁹ This is furthered by Ahmed who maintains that "maintaining public comfort requires that certain bodies 'go along with it'. To refuse to go along with it, to refuse the place in which you are placed, is to be seen as trouble, as causing discomfort for others".²²⁰ As such, Bell can be seen to be causing discomfort for perpetrators and those complicit within rape culture and causing trouble and troubling the conditions which allow sexual harassment and online abuse to flourish and in turn, revealing their implications and the power dynamics that they entail. Indeed, Ahmed contends that "we need to ruin what ruins. We could think of ruining not only as an activity that leads to something collapsing or falling down but as how we learn about things when we dismantle things, or by dismantling things".²²¹ All of this

²¹⁷ Ahmed 2010.

²¹⁸ Ahmed 2017, pp. 248 and 268. This echoes *The Promise of Happiness* in which she asserts "there can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must do" (Ahmed 2010, p. 87).

²¹⁹ Ahmed states in her "Killjoy Manifesto" that a "killjoy is willing to cause unhappiness" (Ahmed 2017, p. 258). Furthermore, she argues that "when she is not willing to make their happiness her cause, she causes unhappiness" (Ahmed 2017, pp. 74-75).

²²⁰ Ahmed 2010, pp. 68-69.

²²¹ Ahmed 2017, p. 40.

is also reflected in *Womanhouse*, in which the artists demonstrate a willingness to kill joy and cause unhappiness and discomfort by refusing to “go along” with traditional gender roles and expectations and dismantling (or ruining) the myth of the happy housewife. Balducci highlights how viewers were “confronted with a deconstruction of the myth of the white, middle-class housewife as a satisfied, fulfilled, domestic goddess”, which was part of a widespread reaction against the role in the US due to Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which was also influential in the making of *Womanhouse* and the second wave more broadly.²²²

In *I Didn’t Ask For This*, there is an expression of collective anger and frustration through the manifestation of the violence that women experience which causes such communal affect. Ahmed argues that “when we make violence manifest, a violence that is reproduced by not being made manifest, we will be assigned as killjoys. It is because of what she reveals that a killjoy becomes a killjoy in the first place”.²²³ In other words, a killjoy “kills joy because of what she claims exists”.²²⁴ Therefore, in showing the ubiquity, pervasiveness and implications of online sexual harassment and manifesting it on the walls of a gallery space, Bell and others involved in the exhibition can be assigned as feminist killjoys. Similarly, the Guerrilla Girls, by exposing the exclusions and inequalities in the artworld, Granet and RCS, by explicitly pointing to victim-blaming narratives and the artists involved in *Womanhouse*,

²²² Balducci 2006, p. 17. Notably, Ahmed explores the figure of the happy housewife, Friedan’s “the problem that has no name”, domestic labour and happiness and traces them as a way to reflect on the landscape in which the figure of the feminist killjoy emerges (Ahmed 2010, pp. 50-53; Friedan 1963, p.5).

²²³ Ahmed 2017, p. 256.

²²⁴ Ahmed 2017, p. 252.

by manifesting the harm done by gender roles and expectations, can also be assigned as feminist killjoys.

Furthermore, consciousness-raising could be described as “raising consciousness of unhappiness”, as there is an unhappiness with what causes such feelings that can emerge through their reveal, yet this unhappiness might provide an effective way of sustaining attention on such causes.²²⁵ Consequently, there can be a recognition of the ways in which unhappiness is structured and how experiences are connected.²²⁶ This is particularly evident in *Womanhouse*, where consciousness-raising was used to illicit artworks and performances, through which the myth of the happy housewife was disrupted. In *I Didn't Ask For This*, consciousness-raising facilitates the expression of collective anger and frustration through viewing and responding to what causes such communal affect, whilst also permitting space for joy and laughter in the recognition of the absurdity of such experiences, which provides relief and lightness.

In *I Didn't Ask For This* and *Cock and Cunt*, feminist joy is enabled through the expression of collective laughter in response to the absurdity of forms of gendered oppression, interrupting the threat and danger associated with such shared experiences and thus somewhat destabilising their power. Indeed, Ahmed identifies that humour and laughter “can challenge things by bringing things to the surface”, magnify things, making them more

²²⁵ Ahmed 2010, p. 70; 2017, p. 258.

²²⁶ Ahmed 2010, p. 87.

real and “reduce something’s power or hold over you”.²²⁷ Moreover, despite the figure of the humourless feminist being close kin of the feminist killjoy, Ahmed highlights that:

We do laugh; and feminist laughter can lighten our loads [which is a shared activity that becomes part of a killjoy survival strategy]. In fact we laugh open in recognition of the shared absurdity of this world [...] Sometimes we laugh with each other because we recognise that we recognise the same power relations.²²⁸

Therefore, this can involve relief and galvanisation, by being able to laugh at that which is often obscured when it is brought to the surface, revealed and exposed.²²⁹ All of this is evident in *Cock and Cunt* in its humorous parody of gender roles and essentialisms, exposing their ridiculousness, as well as in *I Didn’t Ask For This* through its evoking of laughter in response to the revealing, magnifying and interrogating of the symptoms of rape culture and their absurdity, providing relief and making such experiences lighter to bear.

Furthermore, *I Didn’t Ask For This* demonstrates a refusal to be grateful or flattered or silenced in order to accommodate the perpetrator’s feelings of entitlement or dominance, thereby rejecting oppressive gendered expectations of passivity and submission in response to sexual harassment.²³⁰ Consequently, it is helpful to frame this in relation to Ahmed’s notion that the feminist killjoy is an “affect alien” due to how they are “not made happy by the right things” or are affected wrongly and are alienated as a result.²³¹ Ahmed maintains that:

²²⁷ Ahmed 2017, pp. 246 and 261.

²²⁸ Ahmed 2017, p. 245.

²²⁹ Ahmed 2017, pp. 246 and 261.

²³⁰ It is important to note that it is unclear how the harassers feel when they send such abuse to women online or how they expect their victims to react. However, often society expects women to ignore online abuse and simply not let it affect them, as it is seen as an inevitable and unavoidable risk of being a woman online.

²³¹ Ahmed 2017, p. 57.

You can be affectively alien because you are affected in the wrong way by the right things. Or you can be affectively alien because you affect others in the wrong way: your proximity gets in the way of other people's enjoyment of the right things, functioning as an unwanted reminder of histories that are disturbing, that disturb an atmosphere.²³²

This is also evident in the feminist inversion of art historical nude conventions and tropes by artists like Sleigh and Nochlin as they disrupt the male gaze, becoming an “unwanted reminder” of such oppressive histories and structures. Consequently, “you can kill joy just by not being made happy by the right things” or not appearing happy at right moments and by not going along with an expectation; “you are making a statement”.²³³ *Bye Felipe*, which I discussed earlier, exemplifies this by exposing the volatile reactions women experience when they reject men's sexual advancements, rather than presenting themselves as being passive or flattered, thereby going against how the male senders (seemingly) expect the women they are messaging to react. Similarly, Granet rejects the expectation that women should ignore or be flattered by street harassment by focussing on the behaviour of perpetrators. Indeed, Ahmed asserts that “we have to be willing to be experienced as ungrateful, to use this refusal as an exposure of what we have been commanded not to express”.²³⁴ By revealing and laughing at the pervasiveness and ubiquity of online sexual harassment, *I Didn't Ask For This*, like Granet's street signs, subverts and exposes the gendered expectations which dictate how women “should” respond to instances of sexual harassment, which often results in the silencing of women, as they regularly are required either to ignore it, dismiss it as harmless or trivial, be flattered or grateful for the attention.

²³² Ahmed 2010, p. 67.

²³³ Ahmed 2017, pp. 53 and 56.

²³⁴ Ahmed 2017, p. 246.

This is furthered by Phipps who maintains “feminist killjoys [...] are unwilling to be ‘nice’. This is a politics of refusal. It refuses the demands for ‘kindness’ and ‘civility’ imposed by power upon the powerless”.²³⁵ Yet there is also joy in this rebellion, a “collective joy of dissent”, which further exemplifies how there can be a joy in killing joy through subverting acts of sexual harassment or parodying gender roles and conventions, as evident across the case studies that I have focussed on in this chapter.²³⁶ Overall, the figure of the feminist killjoy is present in subversive feminist art across multiple waves, demonstrating the continued coexistence and entanglement of anger, resistance, joy and laughter within feminist praxis.

6.6 Conclusion

As demonstrated through my comparative analyses in this chapter, feminist humour and subversive practices, such as (re)appropriation, culture jamming, inversion, parody, satire and irony, are not distinctive of nor unique to fourth wave visual culture or online forms of feminist activism but rather have a much longer history within feminism art and visual culture. Indeed, humour and such subversive practices were prominent during the second wave and remain a dominant and visible presence within feminism. Therefore, it can be argued that humour is an inevitable aspect of feminist activism due to its multitude of purposes, functions and positions, despite the criticism and division it can cause within the movement. The use of humour and subversion within art and visual culture across feminist waves can forge a sense of connectivity, in which contemporary feminists can feel part of a continued dialogue by engaging in similar practices and tactics. Also, humour and subversion

²³⁵ Phipps 2020, p. 114.

²³⁶ Ahmed 2017, p. 249.

fulfil significant survivalist functions within feminism, providing moments of laughter, joy and relief whilst pursuing mentally exhausting work. Evidently, the continued use of humour and subversive practices within feminism further challenges the oppositional framing of and constructed divisions between feminist waves.

Lawrence and Ringrose maintain that “social media provides an unrivalled space [...] for using humour to galvanise new audiences, discussion and debates about what feminisms are at stake”.²³⁷ Whilst social media has created spaces in which humour and subversion can be enacted, utilised and easily (re)circulated for galvanisation, empowerment, forging connectivity and facilitating dialogue, such affective possibilities of humour have long been exploited within feminist art and activism. This further challenges the supposed newness of the fourth wave and its separation from earlier waves that is often attributed solely to the rise of the internet and social media. Social media does not demarcate a new form of feminist humour or subversion nor are these tactics that I have discussed online creations. Social media can make the utilisation of subversive practices easier, facilitating disruption, (re)appropriation, alteration, (re)circulation, connectivity and shared networked laughter, but these were all aspects of feminist humour and subversion prior to the advent of social media.

Rentschler and Thrift assert that “networking and distribution capacities of social media [...] cultivate new modes of feminist cultural critique and models of political agency for

²³⁷ Lawrence and Ringrose 2018, p. 230.

practising feminism through meme production and propagation".²³⁸ However, these are not *new*, but rather technological affordances more readily facilitate the creation, (re)appropriation and (re)circulation of online visual culture, not just memes, that disseminate such modes and models, making them somewhat more accessible. Furthermore, social media and digital networked technologies have shifted the ways in which publics encounter, consume and respond to visual culture. The participatory nature of content consumption and interaction enabled and encouraged by Web 2.0 expands participatory feminist engagement, extending the reactivity of fourth wave visual culture. In turn, online feminists are not solely consumers, but are also active producers, as the demarcation between the two roles is becoming increasingly blurred, further forging a call and response dynamic between creator and viewer.

Although feminisms and anti-feminisms have long co-existed, social media is a space in which both operate and regularly cross paths. Therefore, feminists continue to play on, manipulate and reconfigure negative stereotypes of feminists, especially the figures of the humourless feminist and feminist killjoy, thus echoing the actions of their feminist predecessors, such as the Guerrilla Girls. This highlights the ways in which shared feminist laughter and joy can coexist with expressions and experiences of anger, rage and frustration, whilst providing relief and lightness. Consequently, feminist humour is not always being used to make feminism more palatable or appealing or less threatening to non-feminist

²³⁸ Rentschler and Thrift 2015, p. 329.

audiences, but it can be utilised in ways that are disruptive and subversive. Feminist humour should not be dismissed as something trivial, flippant or compliant.

As I have demonstrated, fourth wave humour and subversion are not confined to social media but further illustrate the entanglement of the online and offline and how online and offline experiences can inform each other's praxis and discourses. Consequently, the public, personal and private are becoming increasingly blurred, as evident in *I Didn't Ask For This*.

Second wave feminists advocated that "the personal is political", whilst fourth wave feminists appear to proclaim that the online and the private are also political. The spilling over of the online into the offline has formed a visual culture that further blurs this division, forming works that can no longer be placed in one category or the other, but which utilise digital viewing practices and modes of creation, (re)appropriation, circulation and responsiveness, whilst being connected to their predecessors and the longer history of subversion and humour within feminist art. Overall, I have demonstrated the ways in which humour and subversive practices are used within feminist art and visual culture to expose the absurdity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of misogyny and anti-feminisms across feminist waves, whether that is by inverting victim-blaming rhetoric, parodying gender roles and conventions or (re)appropriating acts of online sexual harassment.

CONCLUSION

As I have demonstrated in this thesis, analysing feminist art and visual culture is valuable for challenging oppositional and linear framings of feminist waves due to the ways in which contemporary feminist artists draw on, rework and are shaped by earlier feminist tactics and traditions. Using intergenerational comparative analyses, as I have in this thesis, allows for an exploration of the (dis)continuities that exist between feminist waves, which complicates the perception that the relationship between the second and fourth waves is solely hostile and antagonistic. Furthermore, the employment of my methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism and approach to comparative analyses in this thesis highlight how artistic and visual practices and activist praxis overlap and converge with that of the past, whilst being shaped by and responding to the contemporary context.¹ Thus, my thesis goes beyond the work of scholars who focus on the (online) visual content of the fourth wave, which neglects art historical and visual and artistic connections and continuities across feminist temporalities that can further understanding of contemporary feminist visual culture. For example, Matich, Ashman and Parsons's exploration of #freethenipple or Mendes, Ringrose and Keller's discussion of the Who Needs Feminism? campaign that started in 2012 on Tumblr, in which people post photos of themselves holding handwritten signs explaining why they need feminism, both offer analyses of contemporary digital feminist visual artefacts but ignore art historical connections.² Therefore, my thesis furthers the understanding of fourth wave feminism by analysing the connections, (dis)continuities and

¹ For example, within the technological context of Web 2.0, the affordances, rhythms, conventions and vernacular of social media platforms shape the content which is created and how it is circulated, consumed and responded to.

² Matich, Ashman and Parsons 2018; Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019.

divergences that exist between visual culture and art practices from supposedly opposing waves.

Moreover, my methodology of fourth wave feminist art criticism demonstrates how art historical methodologies can be flexible, adaptive, and evolving to allow for interventions into alive and reactive movements. Evidently, there are benefits of having an art historical grounding when dealing with contemporary feminist visual culture and artistic practices. It allows me to acknowledge and explore the art historical echoes, reflections, legacies and connections within fourth wave art and visual culture. Similarly, an art historical framework is beneficial for accounting for and understanding feminist art traditions, tactics and histories that the fourth wave is shaped by, draws upon and reworks in its visual culture and artistic practices, such as issues surrounding the female nude and male gaze, reclamation, consciousness-raising, performance, the use of alternative spaces, subversion and appropriation.

I have also, alongside my comparative analyses, resisted the erasure of digital feminist works and captured the immediacy, reactiveness, affect and strategies of an ongoing political movement. Whilst social media can allow for the documentation and archiving of moments of feminist activism, this is unstable and permanency is not guaranteed. Therefore, my methodology enables the preservation and documentation of digital feminist content. This is necessary not only due to the instability of online material but also to prevent the erasure and devaluing of women's work and to resist a postfeminist rhetoric that suggests feminism is no longer required or active. Alison Winch argues that "protecting feminist archives is

fundamental because they have the valuable potential to run counter to the mainstream media's one-dimensional and divisive feminist narrative".³ Indeed, through my case studies and methodological approach I have challenged reductive and simplified definitions of the fourth wave, as well as the perception that it sits in hostile opposition to the second wave. Furthermore, I have highlighted the diverse range of visual and artistic practices being used in the fourth wave, as well as the complexity and significance of the work being produced, circulated and consumed.

In this thesis I have employed the wave metaphor as it provides a valuable framework for understanding and conceptualising feminist temporalities. My conceptualisation of the wave metaphor, as outlined in my introduction, overcomes its limitations and criticisms that it is homogenising and simplifying. It also enables further understanding of the overlaps, (dis)continuities and convergences, as well as divergences and points of tension, between feminist generations. As this thesis has demonstrated, the relationship between the second and fourth waves is not as hostile, antagonistic and familial as is often portrayed. Lewis claims that "younger feminists [are] casually denigrating the achievements of their predecessors".⁴ However, this is not always the case as this intergenerational relationship is often collaborative and referential, where knowledge, tactics and experiences from the past are used to shape and sustain feminism for the future. Sundén and Paasonen maintain that "the history of feminist theory and practice is hardly a linear story. It consists instead of parallel and anachronistic timelines better understood as modes of turning to the past in

³ Winch 2019, p. 57.

⁴ Lewis 2020, p. 6.

order to make sense of the present and for reimagining the future”.⁵ Whilst I agree that the feminist story is not linear and turning to the past can help make sense of the present and reimagine the future, the timelines are not parallel lines but are better understood as webs consisting of intersections and entanglements. Even though the fourth wave reflects and draws on the past, it does not signal a return to the second wave but rather indicates the overlaps, continuities and convergences between feminist waves.

Rivers asserts that is characteristic of and a problem in much of the fourth wave that a lack of attention is given to previously established debates, theories and activists.⁶ She demonstrates that this is exemplified by key fourth wave figures like the founder of Everyday Sexism Laura Bates and actor Emma Watson whose apparent lack of knowledge of feminist histories is presented as part of their appeal.⁷ Therefore, they operate outside of “outdated” feminism and the negative stereotypes that this entails and are instead portrayed as having discovered feminism anew and presenting a “new” and different form of feminism, which is divorced from existing and continued feminist activism and theory.⁸ Rivers conveys that “a lack of attention to the specifics of this feminist past simultaneously denies the work and progress made by previous waves of feminism(s), condemning fourth-wave feminists to simply retrace their steps rather than moving conversations forward”.⁹ Similarly, Jack Halberstam maintains that the immediacy, speed and oversaturation of social media can

⁵ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 152.

⁶ Rivers 2017, pp. 80 and 151.

⁷ Rivers 2017, pp. 66-67.

⁸ Rivers 2017, pp. 66-67.

⁹ Rivers 2017, p. 80.

obscure relationships to the historical arc for many of the arguments and debates going on today.¹⁰ However, my exploration of the (dis)continuities that exist between the second and fourth waves through intergenerational comparative analyses challenges these perceptions. Whilst such recognition or acknowledgement of connections to earlier waves may not be explicitly mentioned or even done knowingly, it does not mean that these continuities are any less significant. Indeed, it is nevertheless important to examine these overlaps and continuities to resist oppositional framings of feminist waves and heralding current and future waves as new and completely distinct from what has come before, which can reinforce negative stereotypes of earlier generations of feminists. This is supported by Sundén and Paasonen who explain that:

Contemporary feminist social media projects tap into tactics that were deployed in previous decades, making evident the need to conceptualise feminist activism in terms of continuities and variations rather than clashes and gaps – despite the narrative attractions that the latter model holds in both its linear clarity and drama.¹¹

The fourth wave does not exist in opposition to or isolation from previous feminist waves and it is through examining the (dis)continuities, connections, overlaps and convergences that exist between feminist waves that we can further understand fourth wave feminism.

By offering a more complex and nuanced picture of fourth wave feminism, this thesis has challenged reductive and simplistic definitions. As I have demonstrated in my introduction and chapter one, the fourth wave cannot be simply defined by a single ideology, such as intersectionality, nor one mode of activism, like digital activism, due to the overlapping of

¹⁰ Oren, Press, McMillan Cottom, Halberstam and Ortner 2019, p. 338.

¹¹ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, pp. 24-25.

feminist waves. Instead, the fourth wave can be defined by its messiness, multiplicities, pluralities, inconsistencies and contradictions, which is exemplified by the context in which it emerged and continues to navigate, respond to and be shaped by, as outlined in chapter two. Moreover, as I have illustrated in this thesis, the fourth wave can be defined by a series of entanglements, for example individual and collective, private and public, personal and political and online and offline, as well as the entanglement of multiple waves and coexisting feminisms, postfeminisms, misogynies and anti-feminisms that characterise the contemporary context. Multiplicity and messiness are not weaknesses of fourth wave feminism, but rather are parts of its potential and strength.

Feminist activism is precarious and oftentimes unsustainable. The factors which create that precarity have existed for decades, such as the lack of financial remuneration for feminist labour and the risk of burnout. However, they are heightened by the complexities of digital networked technologies and the fourth wave's coexistence with neoliberalism, misogynies, anti-feminisms and postfeminisms. For example, there is an increased demand for unpaid labour, personal responsibility and entrepreneurialism, alongside the unrelenting abuse that women experience online, the impact of which extends far beyond the boundaries of social media. Consequently, there is an urgent need to tackle the precarity of feminist activism to ensure its sustainability for the future and to value and protect feminist labour.

Moments of overlap and convergence between feminist waves are often overlooked in favour of narratives of division and conflict, which can reinforce misogynistic notions of "catty" or "bitchy" women. Therefore, it is essential to resist linear and oppositional

framings of waves. Indeed, the fourth wave cannot be situated in binary opposition to the second. Instead, the relationship between them is complex, active and fluid. As such, it is necessary to develop collaboration and dialogue between generations of feminists and to create spaces in which this can occur. Many of the same questions and problems experienced by feminists today plagued feminism during previous waves. Consequently, intergenerational dialogue is required to learn from the experiences of the past and sustain feminism for the future.

This does not mean that division and conflict cannot and do not exist between feminist generations. Molesworth argues that it is important for feminists to disagree and even fight with previous generations to open the field of inquiry and proliferate its influence.¹² It is often perceived that feminism is now more fractured than ever.¹³ But, disagreements, division, diversity of thought and the ability to self-question and critique has always been a strength, not a weakness, of the feminist movement, allowing it to remain active, responsive and evolving. This is a feature of the intergenerational comparisons that I have made in this thesis, for example, Cassils and Ridykeulous who both rework and queer earlier feminist works for a contemporary context, as I discuss in chapters four and five respectively. As such, visual culture can be viewed as a sphere in which dialogue, interrogation and critique can and have occur(ed), which can prove instructive for the broader feminist movement in order for debates and conversations to be expanded and moved forward, rather than rendered immobile. This is supported by Rivers, who maintains that engaging with criticism

¹² Molesworth 2000, p. 75.

¹³ For example, Lewis 2020, p. 5.

from within and outside the feminist movement has allowed it to remain dynamic and responsive to adapt to women's changing experience and the shifting political landscape.¹⁴ Sundén and Paasonen convey that "feminist solidarity does not need to build on sameness, homophily, or even agreement. Uncomfortable, dissonant and conflicting feelings may equally mobilise bodies and move them into action".¹⁵ This demonstrates how tension, inconsistencies and division can be galvanising within the feminist movement. Moreover, such disagreement and division does not negate moments of convergence and connection between feminist waves. Indeed, Molesworth highlights that it is necessary in an era characterised by postfeminism for feminism to be vibrant enough to "encourage dissension and conflict without closing off considerations of points of contact, moments of unexpected convergence".¹⁶ Fourth wave feminism, like the waves that have come before it, is not a unified or monolithic movement. It is pluralistic, messy, complicated, inconsistent and contradictory. However, this cannot be fully accounted for if it is positioned as completely separate and distinct from and in opposition to previous waves. Like a wave breaking on the shore, it emerged from what has come before it, whilst being galvanised and mobilised by the current moment, reaching slightly further than the last before being pulled back to the same body of constantly moving water. Therefore, examining points of connection, convergence and overlap between feminist waves is essential for understanding feminism as it stands today.

¹⁴ Rivers 2017, p. 3.

¹⁵ Sundén and Paasonen 2020, p. 65.

¹⁶ Molesworth 2000, p. 97.

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