

Bringing the war home

Participation toward a feminist cultural democracy

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Introduction

March 10th 1914, Mary Richardson walks into the National Gallery of London armed with a meat chopper and slashes her way through the canvas of the *Rokeby Venus* in protest at the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst (Trueman 2015). September 7th 1968, over 100 feminists gather for the *Miss World Pageant* at the Atlantic City Convention Centre to burn feminine products in the ‘freedom trash can’ and crown a live sheep in mass protest against the objectification of women (Heller 2018). December 1977, Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowitz lead a motorcade of sixty women followed by a hearse to City Hall in Los Angeles in a performative public “ritual of rage as well as grief” in response to violence against women (Lacy 2020). May 19th 2015, Emma Sulkowicz carries her dorm room mattress across the stage of her graduation ceremony at Columbia University culminating a year-long performance protest at the school’s failure to expel her alleged rapist (Gambino 2015). 30th October 2020, over 100,000 people gather in the streets of Warsaw to protest the government’s abortion restrictions making it the country’s largest ever political demonstration (Davies 2020).

Feminists have demonstrated time and time again the central role that participatory practices have played in the dissemination of their political ideas and in the struggle toward cultural democracy. The use of applied arts practices has underpinned all three waves of feminism and seen the creation of new participatory spaces and feminist public spheres, yet it is an area that remains undertheorized (Payne 2012). From defiant forms of performative protest, to participatory performance art and experimental pedagogy, to the creation of digital subcultures, feminists have a long history of creating their own networks and mediums that function as transmitters of their political concerns (Keller 2012). These participatory spaces have provided women with counter hegemonic methods of achieving cultural citizenship and thus creating social change (Klaus & Lünenborg 2012). In *A Restless Art*, Matarasso (2019)

lays out three intentions underpinning participatory art and the different social functions it can provide. The first is to increase access to art, the second is to create social change, and the third is the advancement of cultural democracy. These intentions provide theoretical frameworks for the purpose of creating participatory art, and for the actions that drive those purposes (Matarasso 2019). Considering these frameworks within the feminist purpose of social, political and economic equality for all genders, this paper will explore the role of participatory practices within the feminist movement. If participatory art has come in from the margins (Matarasso 2019) then surely, it was the marginalised that brought it in. It is impossible to separate feminism with the desire for social change, and impossible to separate social change with some form of participation thus it can be argued that feminism lay the foundations of what we know today as 'socially engaged art'.

The declaration of war

Throughout history, women have used 'alternative feminist media' collectively and individually to inform, mobilise and motivate political action on behalf of women (Drüeke & Zobl 2012). Long before women could strive for cultural democracy, they first had to fight to become citizens. The role that the arts played in the women's suffrage movement was crucial to the transformation of public opinion and to its ultimate success. It is perhaps the first and best example of how participatory practices and applied art was used to create significant social change. Art helped to make the work of suffragists visible and empowered the average woman by putting a human face on a political issue, yet it was the suffragettes in the UK that first harnessed the power of participatory protest, albeit through militant action. The suffragettes were at war and would use any measure necessary to disseminate their political message. As Christabel Pankhurst declared in 1913; "It is not only war we have declared. We are fighting for a revolution!" (Riddell 2018). From celebratory performative processions, to violent and destructive acts, it was through 'art as action' that they were able to invigorate the public and eventually achieve citizenship for (some, not all) women (National Endowment for the Arts 2020).

Bishop (2012) suggests, from a Western European perspective that the development of socially engaged practices is synonymous with two historical moments of political upheaval and social change: the historic avant-garde circa 1917 and the 'neo' avant-garde leading to 1968. With the 'deeds not words' motto being adopted by suffragettes in 1905 however, their participatory activities pre-date the historical avant-garde developments Bishop pinpoints (British Library Learning 2018). The women's liberation movement leading up to the 1968 uprising however saw an important return to these participatory networks. Alternative media allowed for a group consciousness raising amongst women who were able to formulate their shared personal concerns into collective action (Wark 2006). It was this self-mobilisation that allowed for a second wave of feminism to rise and fuel a new generation of 'bra burners' as they became known in mainstream media, although, according to witnesses no actual bras were ever burnt (Heller 2018). Again, this wave of political protest was underpinned by art as 'action' and feminists were using performative practices to challenge the objectification of women's bodies and garner public attention in the fight for liberation. This group consciousness raising of women's political concerns not only mobilised in public protest but women artists were creating new participatory practices that brought renewed relevance to the question of art's relation to everyday life. They redefined the political in relation to art and thus became agents of change within the larger world (Wark 2006). As Wark (2006) continued:

"Feminist artists enabled the kind of direct engagement between art and the politics of everyday life that had seemed so daunting to their male peers at the time. (Wark 2006 p5).

The personal becomes political

Reilly (2018) explained that feminism's impact on the art of the 1970's constituted as the most influential 'movement' of any during the post-war period. But it was during the 1960's that this movement began to take hold and saw artists such as Carolee Schneeman, Yoko Ono, and Martha Rosler begin to integrate the experience of being women into their art. As Wark (2006) notes; it was through film and performance that artists like Schneeman were able to celebrate "the sensual and visceral energy of the body." As the Fluxus movement and the development of Allan Kaprow's *Happenings*

began to take hold in the New York art scene in the mid-1960's, feminist artists were inspired by the potential for these improvisational and participatory experiences to bring art and life together. Fed up with being forced to participate on male terms, they took up the challenge of developing new artistic strategies that "not only contested existing modes, but also opened up new practices that had been previously non-existent, marginalized, denigrated, or suppressed" (Wark 2006). As women artists became politicized by feminism, the potential of performance as an art of action coincided with their growing sense of themselves as agents of social and political change and they began to interrogate the relationships between art and audience. Early examples of these explorations of audience participation can be seen in Niki de Saint Phalle's sculptural installation *Hon* (1965-66), a large-scale sculpture of a female body which viewers could enter via the vagina, or a few years later in 1968 when Valerie Export entered an art house movie theatre brandishing a machine gun with her crotch exposed in her performance *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1968-69). These artists were exploring alternative methods of participation and redefining the audience's relationship to the art as a way of conveying issues around female sexuality, objectification and loss of agency. One of the most relevant examples of this new method of artist-audience participation however can be seen in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) in which she directs audience members to cut off pieces of her clothing as she kneels silently on the stage. Ono engages in a passive objectification of both the female body and her physical self, highlighting the loss of agency that accompanies touch and female nudity in the public eye (Gallagher 2016). Performance studies of the Fluxus movement have often placed male figures at the centre (Yoshimoto 2009), yet women played a prominent role in the formation of participatory Fluxus performance, and Yoko Ono created one of the most definitive examples of participatory art whereby the creation of the work relies entirely on the audience. As Bryan-Wilson (2003) states:

"The moment an audience member ascends the stage, the piece activates a set of interactions in which vision bleed into physical movement. In this culture of visibility and action, looking is transformed into doing, and who exactly is looking at whom becomes unsettled as the 'viewers' in the audience abjure their spectatorial remove." (Bryan-Wilson 2003)

Not only can *Cut piece* be understood within the broader feminisms of the 1960's in the literalisation of her 'undressing' as violence to the female body but Bryan-Wilson (2003) specifies the ways in which *Cut piece* 'cites the visual culture of atomic war.' Ono features prominently as a 'foremother' of feminist activist art, celebrated as one of the 'Bad Girls' (Reilly 2018) whose work confronted voyeurism, gender subordination and racial tension through an unease of interaction between audience and her performing body. She created a unique space where spectator became participant.

Taking aim at the art world institutions

Not only did feminists create new forms of participation in order to address their political concerns inside and outside the gallery, but for participatory art to have the purpose of increasing access to art (Matarasso 2019), art first had to allow for women to participate. Since 1985, the Guerrilla Girls have been disseminating facts and statistics about gender, racial and sexual inequalities in the art world through street posters, billboards, open letters, projections and books, installed and published throughout the world (Guerrilla Girls 2020). By bypassing traditional modes of artistic communication, they engaged with the public directly in "an in-your-face, unforgettable way" (Guerrilla Girls 2020), as a means of igniting a public debate. Operating under the anonymity of gorilla masks and pseudonyms, they act as a unified entity void of personal identification, much like the militant actions of the suffragettes where the political goal was of greater value than their personal lives. Elsewhere, artists were addressing women's lack of cultural participation through the development of experimental feminist pedagogy.

As Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) began to seep into the cultural thinking of many artists in the 1970's, artists began to consider the intersections between art and pedagogy, with Joseph Beuys being the most well-known point of reference through his conception of 'social sculpture' (Bishop 2012). In the late 1960's Beuys began to understand his role as educator as his greatest work of art and in 1973 he formed his own institution the *Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research* (FIA). Still operational in the mid 1990's, this free and non-

competitive institution was open to public audiences and presented diverse array of workshops and lectures by artists to lawyers to sociologists. Beuys believed that everyone could be an artist and that the entire 'process of living' could be considered as art (Jordan 2013). According to Bishop (2012) it was through Beuys' experimental approach to arts engagement and pedagogy that we now understand and recognise teaching as an artistic medium, yet Bishop also argues that Beuys rendered himself somewhere between educator and one-man performer, presenting himself as the central pedagogic figure (Bishop 2012).

Three years prior to Beuys' formation of the FIU, in California Judy Chicago was envisioning a radical approach to the issue of women's lack of participation in the art world. As teacher at Fresno State College in California, Chicago realized that many women entered art school but few went on to enjoy a professional practice. She wanted to create a radical form of feminist pedagogy in order to encourage their commitment. Chicago was adamant that women would have to veer from the norm and create new forms of community pedagogy in order to foster their participation. Through her feminist art course and later the development of *Womanhouse* at California Institute of the Arts (CalArts), she created an environment where political commitments came first and aesthetic values were framed within a struggle for liberation (Wark 2006). *Womanhouse* was an immersive installation situated in an old donated house and included the work of 15 of Chicago's students including Suzanne Lacy, Faith Wilding and Nancy Youdelman. The artists were encouraged to channel their personal experiences of being women into art making, taking an informal and community driven approach allowing them to express unarticulated experiences through performance and installation. *Womanhouse* was pioneering in the ways in which it was able to "critique the divisions of family and domesticity as private sphere with the public sphere of commerce, civic activity, cultural production and the affairs of men" (Wark 2006). These performative installations dissolved the boundaries between art and life allowing a shift to occur where artists could present themselves as the subject matter for their art thus giving their experiences political importance. Unlike Beuys' iteration of creative pedagogy, *Womanhouse* fostered a community of experimentation and collaboration where the women learned from and with one another. That Suzanne Lacy went on to become one of the central figures in feminist socially engaged art is surely a testament to this.

Mobilizing motherhood

Although Womanhouse remains one of the most influential forms of feminist participatory art, like much of the feminist art at that time it had failed to include motherhood (Moravec 2003). *Mother Art* (1974 – 1986) was birthed as a response to the marginalisation of motherhood within the feminist movement. Given the impetus of the dissolution of boundaries between art and life within the feminist movement, and the premise of feminist spaces being ‘open to everyone’, Suzanne Siegel, one of Mother Art’s founding members remembered the distinct negative response she and other women felt as mothers (Moravec 2003).

In 1974 Mother Art created the ‘Rainbow Playground’ within the Women’s Studio Buildings in Los Angeles asserting that the ideal feminism needed to include childcare as children are a large part of women’s lives. The members of Mother Art were radically addressing the taboo that artists could not be mothers by directly allowing their private, personal experiences of motherhood to infiltrate the spaces of cultural production. Over the coming years Mother Art curated several exhibitions and events for mothers and their children which were open to the wider community and aimed to engage with the public as a way of broadening the understanding of the role of mothers. Unlike Womanhouse, their focus shifted toward the engagement of an audience from a variety of walks of life, not just ‘art world audiences’ which according to Jordan (2013) sets this form of ‘social sculpture’ apart from the likes of Fluxus and Kaprow’s *Happenings*. Speaking of their performative installation *Laundryworks* (an immersive installation situated in a public laundrette, Mother Art 1977), Siegel recalled “we wanted to put that private activity into public space” (Moravec 2003). Mother Art’s activities were dedicated to creating social-political art as a way of instigating social change and by taking their art into non-traditional spaces they were able to directly address their concerns within public space. Mother Art’s early work was focussed on making the personal political through celebrating women’s roles as mothers and allowing these experiences to be included in culture. During the 1980’s however they addressed a variety of political issues from homelessness to abortion and nuclear war, all explored through the lens of how these issues affected women. Whatever the political issue that Mother Art addressed, their approach remained the same over the

years and it was through participatory art such as installation, performance, sound and video they were able to personalise political issues by directly incorporating women's narratives in the public sphere.

Mother Art's approach of personalising political issues through the public presentation of women's auto/biographical narratives remains an approach utilised by feminists in the digital cultures of 21st century. *Shout Your Abortion* began in 2015 as a social media movement whereby the hashtag #shoutyourabortion became a viral conduit for abortion storytelling. It is now a grassroots movement aiming to create space for abortion storytelling through art, media and community in response to the republican attempts to defund and restrict abortion access in the USA. (Shout Your Abortion 2020). The movement imitates Mother Art's installation *The Museum of Illegal Abortions* (1981) whereby viewers entered a church to be confronted with the sound of a tape playing of women recounting their illegal abortions (Moravec 2003). This direct interjection of women's intimate personal experiences into the public domain has long been a tactic used within feminist practices and has only been magnified through globalisation and the development of social media networking.

Virtual feminism

Feminism of the third wave was able to redefine notions of resistance and activism and create new forms of cultural and political participation sparked by globalisation. As Bishop (2012) suggests, "at each historical moment, participatory art takes a different form, because it seeks to negate different artistic and socio-political objects." Where second wave feminism failed to address the intersectionality of feminisms that included race, class, sexuality and gender, the third wave was able to weave between and among these spaces that we all inhabit (Keller 2012). The internet became an accessible space that sat outside of traditional patriarchal structures and institutions and allowed for a new generation of feminists to construct new participatory communities. These online unregulated spaces such as blogs and social media platforms exemplified participatory culture as "a space offering more political agency as cultural producers" (Keller 2012). This self-mobilisation that had underpinned the

feminist movements of the past was now able to take place online in virtual spaces which created a new forum for socially engaged ideas.

In the late 2000's- 2010's a new generation of young women began to utilise the internet as a space to create their own networks for disseminating their work and connecting with one another. Young artists such as Petra Collins were able to “explore their sexuality without being sexualized” (Gevinson 2015) and create visibility for young female artists outside the traditional male-dominated art world institutions. As Collins explains:

“As a young female artist, I never saw a place for my work, didn't see images I felt reflected me anywhere...I have allowed myself to make space, to carve myself a new landscape, which I hope will be inclusive enough for others” (Collins 2015).

Harris (2008) suggests that online DIY cultures and social networking ought to be included in the conversations about women's political and cultural participation as they have provided space to “bring the private into the public in ways unprecedented prior to new technologies”. She argues that we must expand our definitions of participatory practice and take account for the new socio-economic landscape which has radically changed the meaning of citizenship, politics and participation. (Harris 2008).

Nomadic war machines

Since the dissolution of Mother Art in 2000, the turn of the 21st century has seen a surge in maternal activism and the instigation of a ‘matricentric feminism’ (O'Reilly 2019) aiming to address the failures to include motherhood within feminist practices and political discourse. Mothers were once again returning to socially engaged participatory practices to address personal and collective problems affecting women's lives. The censorship of breastfeeding in public spaces and the media-generated public discussions that followed activated numerous performative protest actions around the world and a wave of ‘lactivist online networking’ (Cassidy 2012). In 2006 more than 800 mothers participated in a ‘nurse-in’ at airline terminals around the USA

in protest of the treatment of nursing mother Emily Gillette who was told to 'cover up' while breastfeeding her baby on a Delta flight (Schalch 2006). Since then, countless participatory 'nurse-in' protests have sprung up in the US, UK and Europe in restaurants, shopping centres, public pools and even churches where lactating mothers have been discriminated against (Buller 2012). These mothers were able to self-mobilise through virtual participatory networks which lead to the physical actualisation of a performative protest.

The activities of the 'E15 mums' is another example of how mothers were able to interconnect performative media with political activism and galvanise the public to get behind their cause. In September – October 2014 a group of mums created an 'open house' social centre in an empty, boarded up block of flats at Carpenter's Estate in Stratford, London as part of a series of political protests at the council's attempts at 'social cleansing' of young families in the Borough (Watt 2016). Their actions according to Watt (2016) were a form of 'human assemblage' social campaign whose ability to 'pop-up' anywhere was key in their success. As Watt emphasises:

"They embarked on a series of direct actions notable for both their high-profile visibility - on both social and mainstream media – and their capacity to 'pop-up' and hold space within the cracks and intersects of official striated space with its manifold inside/outside, permitted/prescribed, speaker/listener binary distinctions. They became a nomadic war machine." (Watt 2016).

It was through their collective unity and participation from the public that the young E15 mothers were able to reverse the power imbalance between themselves and council officials. Their 'mother-child-buggy assemblage' with strong female and maternal presence gave them accumulating potency and ultimately the council had to listen to their concerns (Watt 2016). There is no doubt that online social networks and digital participation mobilised and propelled these movements but it is a great example of how participatory online networks combined with physical participatory protest can create a 'double-whammy' impact with more potency for instigating social change.

Toward a feminist cultural democracy

We have seen the potential for feminist participatory protest to ignite social change. The actions of the suffragettes and the women's liberation movement directly lead to policy changes which positively affected women's political and social participation. Participation can lead to life-changing benefits for women; from the E15 mums campaign resulting in the families being rehomed within their borough, to Womanhouse fostering the successful careers of women artists who have gone on in turn to support the next generations. Participation can increase confidence as seen in the 'community art' projects of the 1970's which in some cases lead to women feeling empowered enough to leave their husbands (Matarasso 2019). Yet for real social change to occur, does it take participation en masse? The 'metoo movement' was successful in elevating the public conversation around sexual assault and the crimes of Harvey Weinstein eventually leading to his imprisonment, yet it took over 12 million people posting the hashtag #metoo to achieve this (CBS News 2017). It took tens of thousands of Polish women to go on strike for Polish officials to *consider* a reverse on their abortion ban (Davies 2020), and it took years and years of militant campaigning for the Suffragettes to finally secure women the right to vote (British Library Learning 2018).

Social change is complex and ambiguous (Matarasso 2019) and we still have a long road ahead to achieve cultural democracy.

“Democracy without freedom of expression is impossible. Democracy without an artistic life in which everyone can participate freely, fully and equally is impossible too” (Matarasso 2019).

If participatory art is aiming for cultural democracy then undeniably, we first must address the barriers to participation within artistic life. As Matarasso (2019) suggests, in Britain today there are still individuals and groups who are marginalised and oppressed – “even women.” Yes, even women who in 2019 made up just 2% of the global art market (Halperin & Burns 2019). Where motherhood is still seen as a taboo

in the art world (Judah 2020) and where women of colour make up just 5.6% of gallery representation (Mannarino & Kurlandsky 2018).

Jordan (2013) describes social sculpture as “a network of dialogic, pedagogic, and political aims resulting from human creativity that work in concert to produce social change.” He goes on to say that the enactment of this social change relies on the self-actualisation of participants, that “the audience creates the change; not the artist” (Jordan 2013). When we look to the way feminists have applied this theory this certainly rings true. Participatory art has been central in the mass consciousness raising of feminist concerns and has provided the medium to express political issues within the public sphere, mobilising and galvanising an audience. In 2020, as the world struggles to control a global pandemic, we are facing the reality that “unless we act now, the pandemic could set women’s rights back by decades” (United Nations 2020). If feminist participatory art can help to mobilise the troops, personalise the political and raise public consciousness, then surely it is time for artists to get back in the trenches.

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