

Article

Art Criticism and the State of Feminist Art Criticism

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Received: 25 November 2019; Accepted: 20 February 2020; Published: 25 February 2020



Abstract: This essay is in four parts. The first offers a critique of James Elkins and Michael Newman's book *The State of Art Criticism* (Routledge, 2008) for what it tells us about art criticism in academia and journalism and feminism; the second considers how a gendered analysis measures the "state" of art and art criticism as a feminist intervention; and the third, how neo-liberal mis-readings of Linda Nochlin and Laura Mulvey in the art world represent feminism in ideas about "greatness" and the "gaze", whilst avoiding feminist arguments about women artists or their work, particularly on "motherhood". In the fourth part, against the limits of the first three, the state of feminist art criticism across the last fifty years is reconsidered by highlighting the plurality of feminisms in transnational, transgenerational and progressive alliances.

Keywords: feminism; feminist art criticism; feminist art; art criticism

In *The State of Art Criticism*, James Elkins included a graph of keywords with numbers of entries in the *Bibliography of the History of Art, 1940–2000* (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. VIII) that clearly demonstrates the exponential rise in references to feminism, when compared to terms such as the gaze, psychoanalysis, semiotics, visual theory or deconstruction (900+ for feminism are recorded post-1970, compared with 100–500 for all others). However, he, like many of the other contributors in his book, with the exception of one comment on gender by Irit Rogoff (ibid.) and an assessment by myself (ibid. pp. 237–42), did not address what this exponential rise in references to feminism means for art criticism. By looking back to the debates from this book in this special issue of *Arts*, the danger is that the same lack of attention to feminist concerns will be reproduced alongside other notable absences regarding how art criticism addresses issues of class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, other than by a choice of subject. Again, I find myself the only feminist contributor to this issue, when I am far from the only contributor to an extensive and expanding discourse written by several hundred feminist art critics internationally since the late 1960s. Perhaps, the limited representation of feminist art criticism within the 2008 book was already fixed by its own terms of reference as a response to the journal *October's* 'Round Table on the Present Conditions of Art Criticism' (Round Table: *The Present Conditions of Art Criticism* 2002). This inheritance set how the state of art criticism was defined by primarily male critics and art historians across two generations in Anglo-American culture and in a contrast between popular journalism and historical or theoretical work. In the 2002 *October* debate, feminism also emerged only briefly in discussion by/about Andrea Fraser's institutional critique within her performances, and occasional remarks about gender by Helen Molesworth and Rosalind Krauss. The 'Round Table' did acknowledge there are different forms of academic and journalistic art criticism from belletrist forms of writing, literary genres in art criticism, opinion pieces, and art historical attempts to link the contemporary moment to a past (because the contemporary is still not regarded as "art history"). It too was unclear about difference, ideological interventions, change or differing agendas and aspirations across an expanding global art market or biennale culture. So, when Elkins asserted that art criticism is something "massively produced, and massively ignored" (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 11), the issue of its overproduction was framed in similar journalistic versus academic terms. He was, however, ultimately less concerned about the lack of readership

for art criticism, and much more with how art criticism was seen by art history. It seems that the framework for this debate needs other co-ordinates to open up the discussion otherwise the same assumptions, statements, narrow set of references, key (male) authors and problems in discourse will just be reinstated and feminism's marginal position reinforced.

As Elkins' graph, any database search and resources like KT press' Feminist Art Observatory demonstrate the volume of publications, special issues, exhibitions, books, journals, artists' projects, PhDs and websites dedicated to exploring feminist issues in the visual arts has increased exponentially and globally in the 2000s. Feminist art criticism should not be seen as confined to the 1970s when feminism first emerged, or to the USA, as feminist scholarship has revised, rethought and developed its terms of reference since the Women's Liberation Movement started in the late 1960s and is now present in every discipline, continent and many countries. Is the same overproduction and lack of readership a problem for feminist art criticism or should art criticism start instead to address the questions about practice and method that feminism has been raising about art, art history and art criticism since the late 1960s?

1. Assessing the State of Art Criticism

Much of the debate in *The State of Art Criticism* centered on the idea of how art critics adopt or build a singular position and how their judgements on individual artists or artworks reflect or constitute these positions (Elkins and Newman 2008). What is suggested is that it is only by identifying these positions that the state of art criticism can be assessed. Each critic is duly created as "author" of a system or type of art criticism and not as a contributor to a different discourses in flux, and little consideration is given to the extra-discursive institutional world of publishing (including editorial control, the struggle to get certain pieces published or the policies of journals/magazines/exhibition catalogues/book series). *The State of Art Criticism* continues to show art criticism's proper questions as internal to art (in Clement Greenberg's modernist sense), to stating what art is "about" (in Arthur Danto's sense), or present its role as describing the impact or effects of art emotionally on the art critic as a viewer, while attributing value (in purely market terms rather than social and cultural terms). This closed definition of art criticism as writing that produces objects of interest, and contains a type of looking which determines values, or reaffirms a critic's judgements as a point of view, applies as much to detailed philosophical reflection as newspaper exhibition reviews. Mads Anders Baggesgaard and Lotte Philipsen aptly describe how this focus on the intra-discursive readings of signs/motifs in artworks within art criticism reinforces the inter-discursive dimension of the art market which produces "artists as subjects of interest" on a global stage (Baggesgaard and Philipsen 2013). The contexts in which art criticism is produced are rendered marginal to this central idea and how or why the critic selected the "object" for their writing is obscured. If art criticism is seen in this way as only a response to what is exhibited, performed or installed somewhere now, its capacity to be formative or agenda-setting will remain under-rated but it does explain why curators today, and not critics, appear more powerful to the art world in determining who or what gets shown. Art critics continue to play their part in how works are understood as they produce them as "subjects of interest" in the ways outlined above. The gaps, silences or absences in who or what is selected for subjects in art criticism were not discussed. Michael Schreyach remarks that today's endless reflection on positionality has withered away the modernist 'ideal of a disengaged subject surveying the world from a depersonalized vantage point', but his view of reflexivity is that "admitting one's preferences and investments is self-exposure, not self-criticism" (Elkins and Newman 2008, p. 10). For Schreyach, the current "'heterogeneity, multiplicity and dispersion'" of art criticism as a method or style means that art criticism's view of itself in terms of being "autonomous" as a realm that "can legitimately identify its own objects of inquiry or even demarcate its own boundaries" from "extra-artistic frameworks" has gone. While this might signal the death of one definition of modernist practices, his arguments do not take account of feminism's critique of modernism (Parker and Pollock 1987) and they reinforce the idea that "extra-artistic" discourses, including feminist politics, only disrupt or present further

problems for retaining notions of (modernist) autonomy in art criticism (after Greenberg, after Kant or even after Adorno). Academic divisions between critique (as a “proper” academic approach or considered philosophical/art historical reflection as the alternative) which Rogoff, Boris Groys, Jean Fisher and Michael Newman attempt to raise in different ways in the book are pitched against this form of reactive ephemeral criticism (usually denigrated or identified as journalism) combined with a mourning for Modernist certainties.

In this book, the structuralist death of the author (Barthes 1967; Foucault 1984), it seems, did not give birth to (multiple) readers or readings, only more individualistic interpretations of auteurs coupled with anxiety about over-production diminishing quality. The crisis in art criticism is the loss of modernist hegemony, as the former “proper” model and art criticism is left with subservience to the market in its reviewing practices. Elkins’ seven unworkable cures to this “crisis” reinforce these stakes as either a question of strong voices or the need for apolitical rigor; the difficulties of incorporating theory as a limitation to positions adopted in (reactive) criticism or the need for criticism as reflection on rather than a parading of judgements, and the need to take a stand, without falling into the trap of committed politics ((Elkins and Newman 2008, pp. 80–96). Distinguishing art criticism from art theory, or visual culture was barely rehearsed but if any assessment of the “state” of art criticism is seriously undertaken a re-assessment of impact of post-1960s post-structuralist theories of culture, knowledge production and language—including feminism—on art criticism (beyond *October* journal) is required to challenge the idea that the “state” of art criticism can be assessed by naming and identifying who are the “significant” artists or art critics in art world trends of post-conceptual art, post-media, post-modern, or post-anything in the global contemporary.

Alongside this, the book also reinforced the idea that art criticism is most frequently the source of writing on art before it is “historicized” and processed once again in art history, where it is cited as a snapshot of contemporary opinion or judgement. This privileged synthesizing, categorizing and second-order role is reserved for art history. This trend is more apparent whenever an art history of contemporary art is discussed as it effectively becomes a second-order commentary on “immediate” critical reception (Elkins’ point about reflection on, rather than parading of judgements). Critics (including art historians) writing about contemporary art often have the privilege of putting into print for the first time ideas, evaluations, judgements as well as prejudices about art and artworks. No one can ever anticipate or be certain that their own viewpoints will stand the test of time and enter art history in this manner as a proper object, the correct lasting judgement, a momentary reflection of contemporary taste or the privileged first statement on a new genre, movement or tendency in art. These gambits may be central to the critic’s investment but in art history, it leaves art criticism only as a first-order discourse to be rearranged or judged by the art historian’s second-order sensibilities and preferences. The long-standing prejudice of a necessary time-lag for art objects to become ‘history of art’ has meant that the many collective or sole-authored anthologies of art criticism post-1945, and on every tendency within it, now act as sourcebooks for any art history of contemporary art. In contemporary art history, the distinction between art critic and art historian is collapsed, except by the volume of footnotes!

The book ignored or under-rated how art magazines and journals create clusters of interest and identity in art criticism: think of the differences between *Third Text* and *Art Monthly*; *Sculpture Magazine* or *eflux journal*; *Contemporary And (C&)* and *ArtAsiaPacific*. Each site (as most are now online) has its own agendas, editorial policies, and specific ambitions for the audiences around which they build a relative position in the art world and a reputation. Their identity is also defined by their scope in national/ regional/ international terms, investment in specific media, advocacy of tendencies or particular artists, and marked preferences for different kinds of art theories and writing. Most cover a fraction of what is ever exhibited in the “art world”, and their coverage is always limited to certain cities, types of practice, or limited parts of culture, if thought about in global terms. Art criticism is not one kind of practice, but it is remarkably un-experimental in its standardized formats in most publications: the 700–1000 word exhibition review, the 2500–3500 word article or the 6000 word catalogue essay or artist’s interview.

To reassess the “state” of art criticism, it is to these contingent, contextual and tactical decisions by authors, editors, promoters and sites of exhibition and publication that attention must be paid. These may seem like more “extra-artistic” matter but they are not visible in the writing of art criticism, as the contexts for its own production are not described there, nor can this be found in an institutional history of publishing models in print or (from the 1990s) online. The question of the state of art criticism remains in ideology, in agendas which are not personal but political (often with a small p), in the relations of practices to discourses and in the selection of objects as subjects of concern.

2. Feminism as Gender and Statistics in the Field

Does art criticism become feminist if it offers an analysis of the gender order: that is, the relative distribution of male and female persons in the labor market and in cultural production, including art criticism? Feminism is readily identifiable in arguments about inequality or sex discrimination raised as a problem of numbers in surveys looking at proportions of male versus female artists, or types of artworks, differences between the amount of writing of male and female art critics, or numbers of works in exhibitions or published reviews. Most of this analysis has come from feminist perspectives arguing for social change towards equality by calculating the current “state” in numerical terms as biased against women. However, as I mean to demonstrate, this is only one aspect of feminist cultural politics.

If feminism were just a question of gender measured by change in statistics, how would even these basic ideas enable us to question the field and assess art criticism differently? If women art critics are not mentioned or excluded, do we still get only half the story of what constitutes art criticism since the late 1960s? If the question of women artists as “subjects of interest” in art criticism do not feature, is it because art criticism is only a reflection of what is happening in the art world? If art criticism pays attention to gender bias in who is referenced in its arguments, might this actually change the terms of art criticism because both male and female artists would start to benefit from comparisons with female precedents or references ([Schor 1993](#))?

In the few discussions of art criticism as an area, the gender skew to this debate is often overlooked as the “great names” are automatically given as men, and like many forms of academic sexism, women art critics disappear. Since the 1960s, there have been many influential women art critics. Some wrote only occasionally about questions of feminism or women artists in the last fifty years and did not make this a focus of their work, others dedicated their whole output to these questions. Women dominate art history as a discipline numerically and the field of curating. There are always exceptions and a few repeated names: Susan Sontag, Lucy Lippard, Cindy Nemser, Rosalind Krauss, Elizabeth Lebovici, Isabelle Graw, or Geeta Kapur, for example. There are many artists who have contributed to art criticism, from Martha Rosler, Mary Kelly, Suzanne Lacy, Adrian Piper, Mira Schor, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Coco Fusco, Marina Grzanic or curators, Catherine de Zegher, Maria Lind, Rosa Martinez, Mirjam Westen, Bojana Pejic, Gabriele Schor, Camille Morineau, Silvia Eiblmayr, Reiko Kokatsu, to name just a few, and even more women art historians in many countries who write about contemporary art and feminism in the numerous exhibition catalogues of feminist art exhibitions and books (the field is always expanding in this regard!). The expanding internationalization of these debates is distorted by the overwhelming Anglo-American focus of art critical debate on feminism in English which many feminist interventions outside the USA continue to cite as the only point of reference to diverse local interventions, and this is not the effect of the art market dominance of New York post-1945, but the volume of literature.

Meanwhile, male critics continue blissfully unaware it seems of why they cite exclusively masculine precedents, male authors and male artists or that this might even be a problem or a limitation in the conceptual framing of their work. Occasionally, male critics single out one exceptional woman artist amongst their case studies to accommodate a debate which they are apparently unwilling to engage and readily “overlook”, and one gets the impression rarely read, even when their female peers, immediate colleagues, and even partners, often contribute to its development (for example, [Osborne 2013](#); [Kuspit 1993](#)). Meanwhile, feminist art critics continue to provide the counter-discourse and the collective

case to fill the gaps, offering more and more case studies of women artists and alternative forms of analysis which, they hope, will implicitly or explicitly challenge this closed, specifically masculine, mindset. Unfortunately, this absolute gender division of work produced dominates the contemporary art field at present and feminism's interrogations still function as a politics of correction (Janet Wolff's interview, [Pachmanova 2006](#)). Perhaps this sounds like special pleading for feminist art criticism's role as sole interpreter of women artists' works or a constant reminder of women's writing but this is another distortion in the actual gendered divisions of labor in art criticism. Feminists were and are the only ones writing repeatedly and in any depth about women artists and have been promoting and publishing discussion of their work since the 1970s. Discrimination as forms of collective amnesia, silencing, or the lack of acknowledgement of many feminist scholars for their original work continues, but it is because of this work that women artists also become "subjects of interest".

The gender of the producer, however, does not determine if women artists are the subject of art criticism or if an art critic chooses to write about feminist art practices. There are many critiques of feminist art and women artists produced by men: for example, Lawrence Alloway, a critical friend of the emergent women's art movement in the 1970s (and married to artist, Silvia Sleight); Craig Owens much-cited essay on 'Postmodernism's Others' ([Foster 1985](#)); or Howard Singerman's *Art History, after Sherrie Levine* (2011); and the exhibitions, conferences and projects of Xavier Arakistain or Juan Vicente Aliaga since 2000. These interventions are small in number when compared to the volume of feminist writing.

Statistics, collated by feminists and women artists over the years, show repeatedly that art criticism about women artists is disproportionately smaller in journals and newspapers than their actual representation in art exhibitions in galleries and museums. This overall finding has not changed since the women's art movement started monitoring this in the 1970s ([Kalmbach 1974](#); [Rosen and Brawer 1989](#); [Reilly 2015](#)) as a measure of the visibility of women artists offered in terms of numbers of reviews and articles in different surveys. It has not changed even though the art world now exhibits considerably more women artists numerically and proportionately than in the 1970s, and as the art world has steadily expanded its reach to half the countries around the world (94 countries took part in the Venice Biennale 2019). Women artists have since the late 1990s been 30%–50% of representation in most international biennales and major exhibitions like *Documenta*, a marked shift from 10% or less in the 1970s. Women artists, wherever you look and if you consider the question of gender, now represent 30% of most commercial art dealers' representation from Brazil to Japan, with the exception of a few galleries in New York. Whether the selection of "more" women is a progressive and liberal response to recognition of discrimination against women, or whether it is just that the proportion of women artists has grown because they have been a greater part of an expanding globalizing art market (a reserve army of labor) remains to be seen, but even this question has not been fully analyzed. As more women are currently being shown, one might expect the number of reviews and articles might rise in response to the volume of women artists in exhibitions, but this has not been the case. Discussion of this issue is invisible in contemporary art criticism, except where feminists, like myself, raise it. If art criticism was just a reflection of the art market, why has this sea change to 30–50% been barely noted by critics as a trend? This is an ideological problem and this is why art criticism fails to be reflection of what the art world is showing. As women artists are no longer an exception, maybe art critics have an alibi not to write about them because why should an artist who is not "exceptional" receive any critical attention in the art world, given art criticism's overwhelming hostility to what is indistinct, mediocre or ill-defined ([Deepwell 2014](#)).

The art press may feel that they have done more recently to recognize or even address this situation. The latest special editions on feminism in the visual arts include: the online VoCA Journal (2019); Flash Art's Czech and Slovak Edition (Jan 2019); E-flux *Journal* #92 (June 2018), *L'Internationale's* downloadable publication on *Feminisms* (2018) or *Third Text* (2017, vol. 31). Post-2000, 44 special issues of journals have been published on feminism in the visual arts/on contemporary women artists, as listed in KT press's Feminist-Art-Observatory (www.ktpress.co.uk), indicating perhaps that some

link between feminism and contemporary art has been accommodated. However, a similar number of special issues can be found in every previous decade, indicating no “new” urgency has arisen. The occasional surveys of “women in the arts” in special issues do not counteract the trends which limit the volume of writing to a few male artists compared with the lack of coverage of many women (see Adrian Piper’s critique of *Artnet News*, [Piper 2019](#)). Agendas in art journals do change over time with different editors or marketing policies (for example, the changes at *Art Forum* in 2017 following the *We are Not Surprised* (WANS) campaign, where 3000 women signed an open letter of protest against co-owner Knight Landesman accused of sexual harassment in the art world’s version of #MeToo in October 2017).

Exchanging writing about “significant” male artists to focus on female artists is still regarded by many (male) critics and editors as a category mistake or error, unless the woman artist’s retrospective is already sanctioned by a major museum or a well-known curator’s choice. This error appeared more extreme when women artists were not exhibited so widely in major venues, but today when they are, the aversion to commissioning writing about women artists appears compounded by a fear or rejection of anything that might lead towards recognizing feminist art criticism or engaging with its long track-record of debates ([Deepwell 1995](#)). As Kelly asks: ‘how does a critic authenticate the work of art when the author is sexed and “his” truth no longer universal?’ ([Kelly 1981](#)). Even when women are “chosen”, there remains considerable sexism in what is said about women artists, either by implication, or in the actual adjectives used to describe them as women, not artists, reducing the focus on their work on Agnes Martin, ([Searle 2015](#)), on Bridget Riley, ([Januszczak 2019](#)).

The introduction of gender itself as a factor in analysis and the production of a gendered analysis of the art market has been solely the product of feminist writers and there remains a difference between popular/campaigning and academic forms of this research ([Hassler 2017](#)). Gender is inconsistently included in most statistical analyses of the art market (it was not included as part of Hans Belting and Andrea Buddenseig’s analysis of the Global Art Market, see [Belting et al. 2012](#)). It has only been feminists who have tried to analyze how sex discrimination affects the position of women artists in gallery and museum representation and highlight the selection processes in exhibitions by both male and female curators. Consider, for example, how all male shows appear “natural”, while all female-shows still produce a scandal or a surprise. The consideration of gender discrimination is not limited to the posters by The Guerrilla Girls but has been a continuous feature of feminist art writing since the 1970s and there are many statistical reports by women’s groups in Spain, Canada, Australia, UK, Argentina, as well as the USA which have been the basis for campaigns (as listed in The Feminist Art Observatory). It has only been feminist analysis which has drawn attention to the high numbers of women as curators and art historians in contrast to artists, while demonstrating the limits of their position in leadership, management, and decision-making roles ([Richter 2016](#)). The patterns of discrimination have shifted substantially in the last 30 years and times have changed in favor of greater reassessment, presence and exhibition of women artists’ works through initiatives regarding gender-mainstreaming and women’s role in decision-making, including quota systems for equality, but these changes are not just because a few more women have become directors of museums and now decide on acquisitions and programming, they are part of broader social and political shifts and, in some cases, government policies. The international situation of women curators and museum directors is more complex than just their gender or status, it is also a question of what discourses, artists, types of exhibitions they produce and foster.

How sex discrimination operates in society is usually tackled by renewed attention to formal education and access to it, but this has had little impact in the arts, because women were and still are the majority of art students throughout the 20th/21st centuries and it has taken well over a century for their professional numbers to increase in exhibitions. Feminists in the arts have repeatedly highlighted how overcoming discrimination is a question of visibility, long-term professional development and exhibiting opportunities, not access to education. The problem in art education remains the lack of awareness about women artists or teaching of feminist arguments ([Burgess and Reay 2006](#)). The overall

long-standing deficit in published art criticism in newspapers and journals about women artists, however, does not disappear as an issue because this season is better for women artists than the last, or critics name one particular show as “a breakthrough” because finally they or their editor’s own consciousness of the situation for women changed a little, even when as in Paris with *Elles@Centres Pompidou* (2009–2011) or Museum of Sao Paulo’s programme (MASP, 2019–2020) a whole year is dedicated to exhibitions of only women artists! Where once women artists and their works were dismissed as the “insignificant” production of wives, female relatives or mistresses of greater men under the banner of modernism, today, there is now a rush to exhibit and present the selective few, with international museums competing for the honor to be the “first” to do so. In the USA in 2020, the Feminist Art Coalition will link 30+ mainstream exhibitions of art “informed by feminism” (and mainly produced by women) as an anti-Trump gesture. As the trend of showing more women’s work was already there, this co-ordinated effort is providing a spotlight on work which was not really an “exception” for these venues, although it echoes 2007, when the Feminist Art Project (USA) documented hundreds of exhibitions by women artists co-ordinated as a nationwide response to the blockbusters of *WACK!* (SFMOMA 2007) and *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum 2007). In Australia, 150 exhibitions of women’s art were co-ordinated under the National Women’s Art Exhibition Project in 1995 to map feminist art histories and bring visibility to contemporary women artists (Kerr and Holder 1999). A similar mass-gallery exercise took place, in 1987, in *Spectrum Women’s Photography Festival* in UK (Kramer 1987). Tate Modern prides itself since 2016, with the first woman Director, Frances Morris, who was a former curator of many years, on showing half of its solo rooms by women artists and one third of its displays of contemporary art overall, even though in the collection as a whole women artists’ work is proportionately still less than 10%, in spite of actively purchasing significantly more works for its contemporary collection (around 30%) produced by women. In the broader picture, it is really only a handful of working women artists who are gaining significant international attention with major touring exhibitions and they still register in the press as remarkable “exceptions” to women’s lot (Deepwell 2014). These shifts in policy and practice have not been the subject of major public debate in art criticism, even when New York’s MOMA’s ran a five-year project on women in their collections (2005–2010) and Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2006–2010) started the Second Museum of Our Wishes (see the critique of Hayden and Skrubbe 2010). As there is so much work to do to “redress the balance” or, more precisely, recover the deficit of major exhibitions and acquisitions by women artists in their collections, most museums of modern or contemporary art have many years of programming left to accommodate even a slightly larger number of “significant women artists”.

In this new situation, one might even be so bold as to say that it is women artists’ works which are now “defining” what is most interesting and exciting in contemporary art, but this finding (or hope) is still not matched by the critical attention to their work or the reality that this shift in expectation is a global phenomenon, not a purely national problem which a global elite believes it has “moved on” in its search for novelty. Why is it that the “tradition” in most national modern art traditions remains presented in popular citations of artists and critics, largely with a masculine face? Perhaps some re-education is needed to accommodate these changes, as many critics were schooled before this situation occurred and are clearly not “on trend”. Information on women artists is not hard to find in print or online, amidst the proliferation of artists’ websites, campaigning groups, expanded Wikipedia pages, and library databases, but still as the campaign of the Museum for Women in the Arts in Washington DC worked to counteract, most people find it hard to name more than five women artists. Following *Elles@Centres Pompidou* (2009–2011), AWARE now offers a developed view of one person profiles of leading women artists today; following *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum, 2007), the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art provides a database of women artists (with a focus on New York). Information though is not interpretation, nor does it represent any accommodation of feminist knowledge. Phaidon’s latest anthology, Rebecca Morrill’s *Great Women Artists* (2019) crosses out gender, because women artists are “now” just great artists, as if the problem of women’s invisibility has been solved by publishing again profiles of 400 women artists “now gaining recognition and

value" from more than 50 countries spanning 500 years of "creativity". The repetition of information and original scholarship in this collection should perhaps be compared to Delia Gaze's *Dictionary of Women Artists* (a collective effort of over 100 feminist scholars in 1997, [Gaze 1997](#)) or the basement recovery of works initiated by Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris' *Women Artists 1550–1950* (1976) which became a very important precedent for feminist art historical exhibitions, sparking a wave of museum-based shows of women artists' works around the world, from Russia to Taiwan in the last 40 years. Not mentioning gender it seems, is offered as a means to establish that all artists are just artists, but in reality it is how feminist questions about the gender order and persistent inequality ([Evans 2017](#)) are just avoided.

3. Feminism in Neo Liberal Terms

Looking at recent online articles where feminism is mentioned, two articles are repeatedly cited as the foundation of feminism (Linda Nochlin's 'Why have there been no great women artists' (1971) or Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975)) (e.g., [Tani 2015](#); [Cooper 2015](#); [Gavin 2017](#)). Popular journalism reduces feminism to two burning questions: whether women can be great artists (obstacles face them, most notably becoming mothers!) with each case study of a woman artist raised proving they might be "great" and theories of "the" (male) gaze that are endlessly subverted by risqué and "difficult" women artists' works about "the body". Serious mis-readings of both Nochlin and Mulvey's essays are now in play and this lamentable situation is reinforced by the absence of feminist theory in most art school curricula, where these are often the only texts students are asked to read. While Nochlin's own essay warned against trying to answer the rhetorical question and argued that the absence of women artists is a question of institutions and how art history constructs (male) artists through reputation and myth, popular journalism uses this "greatness" as a "hook" to ensnare women in this debate ([Nochlin 1971](#)). Mulvey's specific address to mainstream Hollywood cinema's production of women as objects-to-be-looked-at for the male gaze is structured around Freudian distinctions between narcissistic and fetishistic scopophilia, but has become attached to a non-gendered "gaze theory" and generalized into all forms of vision and mass media ([Mulvey 1975](#)). Her work on the female gaze is not considered ([Mulvey 1989](#)).

Something else is also now at work. The promise of greatness (as market success) and the gaze (as the ability to control how things are seen), it seems, appeal most to neoliberal agendas. The first, represents the rationale for the career-orientated business woman/female entrepreneur, either curator, collector or artist, now doing it all, and entering the mainstream of a new global elite, focused on "success". Women artists visible in the international art market today are typically cosmopolitan, have gained two or three higher education degrees, speak several languages, and are often highly mobile because they live and work in or across several countries. Their business savvy speaks to that of the dealers and collectors who buy their work. Given that in this elite, all women are now "strong" career women, financially independent and presented as in charge of their own destiny, perhaps we need to be more critical about the functioning of popular journalism's definitions of pseudo-feminist autonomy and independence as even a feminist question when the broader labor market is ignored. Meanwhile, the same women are endlessly confronted with having to explain their behavior or relative economic autonomy, not their work, in questions about the degree or kind of feminism which they support. There is a confusion between working as a contemporary artist with all that this entails and this neo-liberal version of female success. Meanwhile, women who worked for 30–50 years as artists are constantly presented through the trope of "recovery" and so the question of "greatness" has become a superficial marketing ploy for their rediscovery. This cliché in press releases is repeated by sadly, ill-informed art criticism. These claims about recovery are a poor match for how this is understood by feminist scholars, in detailed reassessments of someone's career path in a culture where discrimination was rife, new evaluations of works produced, new historical archival research, or the restoration of women's work stored for decades in basements and/or attics. They also ignore or avoid Nochlin's

refutation of the “biology as destiny” thesis or her arguments about gender and genre or its impact in art history (Nochlin 1971).

Mulvey’s work as “gaze theory” (without gender) is dragged into debates about what might constitute “new” imagery by reading novelty against the overwhelming culture of spectacle, conspicuous wealth and extensive grooming of bodies (still largely female) in mass media and mainstream cinema (Mulvey 1975). The overwhelming dominance of women’s objectification as a visual economy is forgotten because all bodies—now men’s too—are subject to consumer fetishism. Similarly, “gaze theory” provides the alibi to any discussions of outlandishness in representation, trans-gender identities, role reversal or images of excessive and abject forms of femininity which are paraded as a new fashion item or the signals of “diversity” in action but never as a subversion of the rigid and restrictive social policing of femininities and constrained life choices that motivated several generations of feminist artists. The result is not more analysis of narcissistic and fetishistic scopophilia or the identification of a female gaze, but a fascination with work which provides more and more extreme variants of body politics, but is still heavily weighted towards women appearing nude (in heavily conventional ways), not naked (as its subversion). Gender-fluidity is then combined with an explosion of new work where self-exposure, “dressing-up” and narcissistic self-representation are presented as central (e.g., *Kiss My Gender*, Hayward Gallery 2019). The problems of representation that feminism has named in terms of race/sex/class and extensively explored across recent decades cannot be avoided when new types of exoticism, exceptionalism and Otherness using women’s bodies still structure critical and curatorial choices for attention—and these are overwhelmingly presented now along the lines of race and sexual preference, rather than gender, where non-specific and ambiguous binaries merge with “the gaze”. Confusion, not hybridity, is presented as signalling visible diversities available for neo-liberal tolerance or acknowledgement, without real change or recognition of sub-cultures or differing life-styles. To underscore Nancy Fraser’s argument, recognition has emerged as key to social claims for identity, but this is neither recognition nor redistribution (Fraser 2013). Overgeneralization is a common fault in art criticism and certain categories in circulation like “the body”, “the gaze”, and “the post-colonial” continue to be used to mask or hint at subversion, deterritorialization, radicality, transgression, while the dominance of male, white, heterosexuality or its control of agendas continue relatively undisturbed as the status quo. This is why different kinds of identity politics defining who the artist is and not the politics their works explore has it seemed returned with a vengeance in art writing.

What this fetishization of “greatness” and the “gaze” as neoliberal feminism today effects is the eclipsing of fifty years of feminist research and art practices, where whole areas of work on representation, women artists and feminist interventions in the politics of representation and their histories are wiped from cultural memory. The complexity of debates about sex/gender as a distinction or the necessity of class/race/sex analysis across different histories are erased and so too is any level of engagement with feminist post-structuralist thought on embodiment and politics of knowledge production. The hypervisibility of a few role models against the reality of many other available ones tends to reproduce the selective processes of art history in sifting significance and “genius” into something possessed by only a few rare beings which curators, rather than critics, identify by exhibition. The critique of the criteria in conceptions of (male) genius which feminist art critics and historians, from Wayne (1979), Krauss (1986), Battersby (1989) have undertaken is sidelined and has to be reinstated again (Gorill 2020). The recovery narrative for those few “forgotten” and “overlooked” amongst women was a rhetorical trope for “minor” artists receiving new exposure, who were the friends, fellow travelers and companions of “great men”, but the use of these very adjectives beautifully reinforces the continuous picture of the “lesser” status of the woman artist. The reproduction of the same old critical tropes about women artists has become more difficult to sustain because today there are just so many more women artists visible internationally, producing many different kinds of works of depth, imagination, intelligence and sophistication. The neo-liberal mis-readings of success and diversity trap us in old and empty rhetoric of biological difference as sex or sexual preference in

discussions of the difference between artist and women artists. While gender in non-binary forms invites empathy and tolerance, but not change.

The rewriting of feminism in neoliberal ways (a problem discussed at length by [McRobbie 2008](#); [Fraser 2013](#); [Evans 2017](#)) for artists emphasizes worldly achievement or performance but does not contradict the Romantic notion of artists as troubled, dependent, unworldly and sensitive souls, exploring difficult personal topics and human emotions. This contradiction contains the gender differences between artists where “artist” is a special term for only (some) men and those few women (where childlessness or one child only is presented as a virtue), while the term “mother” is reserved for (many, but far from all) women ([Allen 2012](#)). The re-assertion of this old distinction dividing creative imagination (mind) from the body, but the capacity or actuality of procreation (in women’s bodies) from creativity has its roots in Romanticism, where art was separated from the world of work/politics and creativity positioned as the opposite of repetitive, deskilled, often manual, labor. Art became a “free” apolitical/non-political activity concerned with beauty, perception, the imagination and the emotions in contrast to the dull uncreative repetitive everyday world or “women’s work” ([Pollock 1982](#); [Battersby 1989](#)). Challenging this idea of women’s work remains a core subject for feminist artworks, even those celebrated in the mainstream by Cao Fei or Mika Rothenberg who highlight its contradictions in factory work today.

The divorce of mother from artist is not contradicted by the numerous examples of women who have had children and continued to work as artists in the last 150 years, nor by detailed feminist examinations of motherhood ([Liss 2009](#); [Buller 2012](#)). No amount of information defeats Romanticism’s “fuzzy logic” or its repetition in popular arts journalism when women artists’ who are also mothers are discussed with some amazement, and the question of whether or not to have children is seen as a “personal choice” or an “obstacle” to success, as if giving birth was more significant than having a dealer or friends who are curators or critics in one’s career plans as an artist ([Stalp 2016](#); [Uszerowicz 2018](#); [Rubin 2015](#); [Gregory 2018](#)). This is why in today’s post-industrial technological economies, pregnancy is still a philosophical problem ([Mitrofanova 1998](#)), even when becoming or being a mother is rarely accepted as a reason for women’s exclusion in the labor market when most women work (and, in many countries, anti-discrimination legislation exists, and for some workers, “maternity pay”). Motherhood still carries some social/ political/economic status for individual women and different degrees of personal satisfaction, pleasure or frustration, but as hundreds of women students who chose regularly to write about the contradictions between art and motherhood, creative work is regarded as radically separate from either being pregnant, the act of giving birth or maternal care. Why should the arts continue to present this situation so differently in symbolic terms (even though, as mothers know, children are not welcome at private views or art parties and the timing of these art world events conflicts with “bedtime routines” or “family time” at weekends, away from school or work). In response to this fuzzy logic, the many women artists who are mothers have exploited this known paradox, turning it on its head, re-examining these myths, talking about their status as M/Others and founding multiple collectives of mother artists, research networks, protest groups and artists’ residencies since the 1970s (see reference list). This work on motherhood is not, it seems welcome, in the mainstream, even though it has explored the endless repeated contradictions and ambivalences in these women’s subjectivities and been the subject of many exhibitions or publications (e.g., two most recent, [Dhillon and Francke 2016](#); [Briukhovetska and Kulchynska 2019](#)). The only commonly presented alternative scenario for women as creative artists (based on 1950s ideas of two stage career for women) is that they can blossom as artists, only after their kids have left home, as grandmothers! ([Gavin 2017](#); [Sussman 2017](#); [Saner and d’Arbeloff 2008](#); [Cohen 2013](#); [Skidmore 2015](#)). Changing this Victorian prejudice of a “choice” between motherhood or career, to a two-stage career model (pre- and post-children) does not change the problem of negotiating motherhood for women artists ([Blossom 2017](#); [Butler 2008](#); [Cashdan 2016](#)). Nor does the neo-liberal discussion of parenting (without gendered stereotypes) for creative professionals, because this remains a question for women, as it is still women who do the majority of caring activities globally (not just as mothers, but as low-paid care-workers in economies

around the world). Discourses about failure or self-exposure/confession are not the only counterpoint to this vision of “struggling” in a career path when there is little accommodation for M/Others or caring labor (for sick, disabled or elderly) and this might actually be the key subject-matter explored by one’s work. This is also why so many feminist critics exploring the materialist conception of labour are returning again to the Marxist-feminist debates of the 1970s about exploitation of homeworkers, art and capitalism, or wages for housework to address the systems of social reproduction and the limits of capitalist notions of production (Dimitrikaki 2013; Sokolowska 2016; Vishmidt 2017).

This, however, is missing from the popular and neo-liberal identifications of “greatness” or the “gaze”, as an accommodation for feminism, even as many women artists continue to make work which explores highly contradictory and often ambivalent experiences of “motherhood”. To see these developments requires questioning an exclusive focus on a few celebrity women artists and a reductive “feminist agenda” concerned only with questions of “genius” and “the gaze”, while it rigorously shuns “motherhood” as an art world issue.

4. States of Feminist Art Criticism

Feminist writers since the 1960s (generally referred to as the second wave) have asked different kinds of questions about art and art criticism through deploying sex/gender/race/class. Feminism has been repeatedly described in art criticism, art history and aesthetics as a perspective (singular) but it has never been a singular approach to art criticism, it exists as feminisms in the plural. Feminist art criticism does not reside exclusively in the work of one art critic as model for all its practices (as Greenberg became for modernist art criticism): it is a collective project with multiple and diverse contributions to its debates and a “state” in which different cultural politics are also present. While some feminists have (riffing on the titles of their books) in the 2000s experienced a negative decade (Schor 2009) or investigated how feminism is presented as a bad memory (Pollock 2019), it may be more accurate to investigate why a women’s work is never done (de Zegher 2014) and why feminism is still our name (Hayden and Skrubbe 2010).

Feminist art criticism has sought to provide different terms in which the work of women artists could be discussed theoretically and politically. How to describe the complexity of these debates and substantive shifts over several decades remains a key political problem for feminisms but this is not a question of thinking about waves of feminism: second, third and now fourth wave, each with different priorities or concerns (Mondloch 2012).

In this broad, global project in contemporary art, feminist art critics describe themselves, their politics and their writing as feminist in many different ways—defined as much by politics—socialist, communist, liberal, and radical feminisms—as by identifications with different schools of thought—black feminisms, Chicana feminisms, US Third World feminist perspectives, indigenous feminisms—and different approaches—queer feminist, de-colonial, transnational or inter-sectional. Criticism is not a question of the subjectivities, taste or cultural preferences manifest in the ethnic/racial/national/locational identity of the critic. If every branch of feminisms as a political movement (because feminism is an umbrella term) appears within feminist art criticism, (liberal, socialist, materialist, post-colonial, Marxist-feminist, anarchist, culturalist, indigenous and decolonial), each can be considered as a tactic in a collective discourse where different alliances are present. How to understand this framing beyond “names”, generations and “identity politics” is now the key question, because each type of feminism is believed to apply a uniquely different approach to its subjects through a negative critique of others. It has to be seen in the context of its contribution to a shared collective “imaginary” which still functions as “feminism” and in which many women are engaged even as new names and references on most subjects or issues and global divisions between “first”, “second”, “third” and “fourth” world problems also emerge. What links them is a consistent oppositional or resistant discourse to the current status quo, which begins by pointing to presences and absences in limited debates along gender lines whether in Black, pan-Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Chinese or Latin American and indigenous perspectives in art criticism, again primarily voiced by women critics,

on every type of art practice and exploring every imaginable form of intersectionality, transnationality, transgenerational dynamic and every form of sexuality, sensibility or representation. This is why the state or field of feminist art criticism has now to be considered in its local/global dynamics and beyond national or territorial claims for a singular practice or type of sexual/ethnic/religious/racial identity (Deepwell 2020).

Clare Hemmings' argument that feminist journals have tended to reinforce three predominant narratives of "progress, loss, or return" could be extended to current feminist art criticism (Hemmings 2011). The glories of the 1970s pioneers are regularly replayed in narratives of progress culminating or compared with a liberated present; narratives regarding loss involve exploring works from the archive or basement; and ideas of return that we should constantly look back in order to move forward. Susan Gubar argues instead, through the work of feminist literary critics, that criticism should be viewed in terms of the ideological impact of critique (not just of patriarchy but other feminisms); to recovery of women in either gynocriticism or *écriture féminine*; to the expansive engendering of differences as the 'activity of bringing gender to bear upon other differences: sexual and racial differences primarily, but also economic, religious, and regional' (Gubar 1998, p. 884). Gubar cautions against developments in 'racialized identity politics and poststructuralist theories [that] have framed their arguments in such a way as to divide feminists'. She identifies two forms of meta-critical dissension, she regards as pernicious in their effects: first, a self-defined/nominated critical election (with its analogue, critical abjection) questioning all claims for feminism as just a reinforcement of a white privileged Universal which negates black womanhood, and second, a theoretical obscurantism in post-structuralisms that "woman does not exist", as leading to the dissolution of any claim for organizing collectively as women. More positive presentations of why these arguments remain important to feminist solidarities or alliances can be found in Chandra Mohanty's *Feminisms Without Borders* (Mohanty 2004), Gayatri Spivak's role as post-colonial feminist critic on aesthetic education (Spivak 2013) and Donna Haraway's work on 'Situated Knowledges' (Haraway 1988). Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed* provides the counterexample to Gubar as she concentrates more positively on how to link the political approaches of equal rights, revolutionary, supremacistic, separatist and differential forms of opposition through a dissident and coalitional cosmopolitics across semiotics, deconstruction, meta-ideologizing, differential movement and democracies (Sandoval 2000). Sandoval's thesis rests on re-conceiving the citizen-subject and the project of theoretical engagement via a shared methodology rather than intellectual apartheid and division. Feminism began because of the disenfranchisement of women, but this was a claim for full participation in citizenship and for social, civic and cultural rights which continue in important arguments about social justice. These are first world as well as fourth world problems, national as well as international questions, affecting all women differentially. Her problematic requires a different dynamic on citizenship beyond the national into questions of human rights today, where the perspectives of migrants, refugees or the undocumented need to be fully considered.

Meagher argues that the challenge of feminist art criticism remains the need to question taken-for-granted narratives including those which contain 'metaphors of inheritance and legacy, but also, debt, rivalry, and recrimination' (Meagher 2011, p. 312). Highlighting how one narrative in Western feminist art history became dominant in which empirical research on women artists supposedly gave way to complex feminist theory (a division secured across generations), she challenges whether the myth that a 'first generation is displaced by a poststructuralist second generation persists not because it is true (it is not) but because it performs the function of disidentification. It constructs two subject positions (a first generation, a second generation) as "mutually exclusive phenomena" (Butler 1993, pp. 111–12), which, as Butler puts it, means that the assumption of one "is purchased at the expense of another" (Butler 1993, p. 112)' (Meagher 2011, p. 314). Important as Meagher's analysis is for highlighting false inter-generational narratives, there are now four to five generations of feminist scholars across the globe and other stories are now required.

A feminist perspective is not a lens that can simply be put on and taken off like a pair of glasses to see and understand the world in a specific, eccentric or marginal fashion. The lenses of feminism are

political (Rosser 2005). Feminist art criticism, like art criticism in general, is wrestling with how to write about late modernist, postmodernist and contemporary global art produced today and alongside this considering the impact of developments in feminist theory across many disciplines on the issues raised by contemporary art. Renewed interest in feminist standpoint theories (Harding 2004) are not about reclaiming identity politics, as a standpoint remains a complex position in discourse, a question of tactics, not a personal opinion or a subjective point of view. Standpoint theory renews feminism's long-standing emphasis on how the personal is political only when personal experience is considered in broader political frameworks and as an intervention. In standpoint theories, feminism's engagement of "difference" [in either its post-modern or contemporary form] is not written to provide a proof of absolute Alterity, Otherness, Mestiza, Hybrid, sub-Altern or Cyborg status claims, it is the opening of a shared space in which feminisms (in their multiplicity) can be discussed, for their differential forms of opposition (Sandoval 2000).

In feminist art criticism, there are many approaches which have been tried but it is important to register their politics. Lippard was clear in *From the Center* (1975) that she was developing feminist essays about women's art in the USA, and in Europe, and in *Get the Message*, (1984) she switched to focus on an issues-based relationship between the subjects of art and feminist politics. Issue based forms of analysis still dominate feminist work: on violence, the politics of citizenship, war, civil strife, migration and ecology as well as political reforms and different histories of social struggle, as well as the different models of feminist participatory public art projects with different communities (and not just, New Genre Public Art (Lacy 1995). The broader reconsideration of collective, shared and common identifications of feminism which is sought by most feminist art critics on the left is well underway through examining ideas of the commons and the politics of women activist groups and collectives working in the arts.

Griselda Pollock's arguments for a feminist reading examining symbolically, socially and psychoanalytically all works of art continue to develop the feminist theorization of sexual difference (post-Lacan) (Pollock 1996). Feminist art criticism is not always an attempt to define what "feminist art" is and most feminist essays go well beyond feminist aesthetics (Felski 1989). Regularly there are claims and counter-claims for essentialist or anti-essentialist approaches, not least around arguments identifying "a" feminist aesthetic, but these can no longer be narrowly referenced to Judy Chicago's definition, which began as a question about female imagery (and was actually operative only between 1973–1976). There are and have been many attempts to define "feminist art" in or against women's art practices or in terms of a feminist aesthetic (Barry and Flitterman-Lewis 1980; Lintott 2019) as well as attempts to define what constitutes a feminine as opposed to a feminist sensibility. Problematizing a feminine sensibility has shifted to different types of *écriture féminine*, developing ideas from Julia Kristeva of *jouissance* in avantgarde subversion (Kristeva 1980), the possibilities of a differential female Universal (Irigaray 1985), or the idea of lesbianism, not simply alienated by compulsory heterosexuality, but in which there are not two sexes only (Wittig 1991). Larger questions of Afro-futurist, queer, cybernetic, indigenist, or black aesthetic theories have been rapidly developed in feminist thought. The difficulty of defining feminist art—by type or category in art—which was rejected by most feminists is now presented as at odds with proposals for an art informed by feminism (Mary Kelly in Nixon 2016, p. 75) to highlight how both art and feminism mutually challenge each other in the field of visual arts. This distinction is also related to a clash between expectations of analytic approaches to aesthetics which aim for a definitive reading and the multiplicity of initiatives in feminist politics which have developed the dialogue between art and politics in different forms of radical avant-gardism.

The feminist problematic (Kuhn, quoted in Parker and Pollock 1987) remains the dominant method for exploring feminisms as art critics attempt to establish that an artist's work is feminist (through its maker's intention), or that she wants her work to be read as feminist (collectively as a contribution to a movement), or that her work is feminist (politically) because it is about/refers to/images or gestures towards a known feminist political issue. Mary Kelly's argument for a closer examination of an artwork's materiality, sociality, sexuality has continued (Kelly 1981). Whether the works in

question provide examples of innovation (beyond modernism) or challenge to the maintenance and reproduction of ideas “about” women or women’s experiences of the world (beyond Eurocentrism or phallogocentrism) are still key questions in feminism. While much feminist art criticism discusses well-established feminist beliefs or perspectives on a known political issues: abortion, negative body image, health care, violence against women, women’s street protest, women’s maintenance labor in the home, for their families, or as social care. Feminist artworks also address many other subjects: the nuclear arms race, ecological disasters, the cold war and global politics, problems of migration, sex-trafficking, social injustice, algorithms and the uses of the net, fashion and make-up, alongside women’s experience of everyday sexism, racism or homophobia. Today this agenda of constant assertion of women’s difference and different experiences is largely pursued on a case study by case study basis, which leads to a lot of repetitive work establishing the same common ground for justifying feminist art criticism’s existence as a discourse or a variant of other art-world dominant agendas. Sometimes this “difference” appears in identifications “about” being/ experiencing versus acting/ doing things as a woman or as an artist. The whole discourse of affect has also engaged feminist critics (Reckitt and Fisher 2016). Renewed work on the gender order, the gender system, and how these structures the hierarchies and hegemonies through which gendered oppositions exist across genres or categories used is also predominant in work on textiles and craft. Sometimes, this detailed work on individual artists and their works, as a result, does not question the terms or categories in which it is set and often the same tropes are repeated and duly applied, whether the case study is in the UK, Japan, Ukraine, South Africa or Argentina. In these identifications for, in and about feminism, the underlying model is like the search for the most progressive “modernist” tropes and traits in order to establish a claim for positioning the artist in relation to that national/international canon called “feminist art”.

In 1978, Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff identified how the use of hysterical verbs and gendered stereotypes abound in the binary thinking manifest in most art criticism (Robinson 2001). In 1981 Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker demonstrated how the feminine stereotype is central to how “Art” is separated from “women’s work” (Parker and Pollock 1981) but feminist art criticism now has to consider if the “domestic” traps them again in the margins of history. Feminist art criticism, for example, has led the theorisation of the gap between woman as the idealised figure/metaphor/muse in visual representations and discourses in contrast to women as social-historical beings inhabiting time and space with experiences mediated by representation (the space of artists’ lives and knowledge and spaces in which the work is received, both physical and discursive). This juxtaposition has reframed an extensive discussion of the politics of representation in terms of how femininity is constructed in nudes, muses, Madonnas, whores, Goddesses, pin-ups and historical monuments and allegorical female figures. As Carol Duncan (1989) argued in ‘MOMA’s Hot MaMa’s’ women’s bodies still frame the museum and represent the allegory of culture, and this is valued over and above women’s creative production. Feminist art criticism and art has highlighted this use of women’s bodies in relation to the formation of representations of racial, national and ethnic identities around the world, challenging colonial and Imperial histories and memorializing forms of nationalisms, where women’s bodies are frequently used to stand for the nation. A critique of the links between woman, home and nation have been at the centre of assessments of women artists’ work, especially in post-colonial writing about globalisation and diaspora or under former Socialist and authoritarian regimes (Shohat 1998; Datuin 2002; Machida 2008; Grzanic and Tatlic 2014). This work has mounted an extensive critique of tokenism and identity politics on the question of being represented and being seen as “representative”. Feminist art criticism has explored and analysed many new topics brought into art by feminist artists, not simply those about menstruation or wombs, (two common stereotypes about feminism). These explorations were much more than formal, semantic, or philosophical games about language or writing styles, and feminist writing has attended to important ideas about cultural and historical memory, trauma and commemoration, new forms of social and collective action and organization-building as well as troubling and problematic family and social histories.

Feminist art criticism never aspired to be a mirror to an art-world politics on/about women artists, nor was it simply a reaction to an art world trend. It aimed for transformative effects on the situation of women artists, on how art history treated women as subjects and changing the agenda for social and political concerns in art criticism. Lacking places to publish, women founded more than thirty feminist art and women artists' art magazines and journals in print lasting for different periods of time over the past 50 years (also mapped in The Feminist Art Observatory). Articles from them are regularly anthologised and translated, as can be seen by the proliferation of feminist art anthologies appearing around the world since the 1980s (also listed there). Consider, for example, the contrast between journals like *Lip* and *Heresies*, or *Make* across three continents and between the art history of *Women's Art Journal* or the analyses of *Women and Performance. n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, (1998–2017) published over 500 articles in 40 volumes and presented writers and artists living in more than 80 countries around the world. This claim is in line with most current art-world definitions of internationalism, where the 72 biennials worldwide pride themselves on including 40–90 countries in the world in each edition, to fulfil their visions of a global contemporary. *n.paradoxa* inspired transnational and transgenerational comparisons over its twenty years of publication.

In the late 1970s, it was widely realized and much debated that holding exhibitions of only women artists no longer made any conceptual sense: the focus of feminist work switched to thematic, conceptual and historical shows where political and social issues and new thematics and different types of art practice (textiles/fibre art, cyberfeminism, video, performance, public art) have been considered. Many critics, including some feminists, argued that gender alone could not be a unifying category in the visual arts, as it was just as arbitrary as defining art by country, race, ethnicity, or the sexual orientation of its maker (which have all nevertheless continued as the basis for organising exhibitions!). It seems we have returned to this moment again, in spite of the critiques of identity politics and national profiling of artists, and even though the social/ economic/political identity of the artist should not determine the work or how it is read, the author's sexed identity most commonly does. The art world (museums/galleries/art schools/dealers/auction and publishing houses) operates its selection procedures about artworks by nation and region as much as by type, adding race and sexual orientation (to demonstrate "progressiveness") in preference to gender, class, ethnicity or religion. Gender, it seems, swings in and out of favour on this list of preferences but art criticism overall remains in favour of men over women.

Museum curators now want to frame "feminism" as a subject through a set of objects, approaches, histories, genealogies and protests. The blockbuster season of women's exhibitions was not confined to 2007 and two North American shows, *WACK!* and *Global Feminisms* and: as the list of exhibitions on the Feminist Art Observatory demonstrates major international feminist exhibitions with different curatorial theses have taken place in nearly every year and many countries. As Mira Schor also identified, even in the US, between the women artists included in *WACK!* (SFMOMA 2007) of art produced up to 1980 and *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum 2007) where only women born after 1960 were included, there remains a "missing" 2.5 generation of the 1980s and early 1990s who were actively involved in feminist art initiatives (Schor 2009). Feminist art critics and curators have been challenging or reassessing what these exhibitions and their histories mean for the legacies and narratives we tell about histories of feminist art across generations, its actual work on protests and campaigns, different models of resistance (from the most realist to the most abstract), different moments of social organisation, political rebellion and transformations of political and imaginative life. To establish this, one might compare exhibitions of inter-generational protest in the diverse contributions of *Still I rise (Act 1: Nottingham Contemporary, October 27, 2018–January 27, 2019 and Act 2: De La Warr Pavilion, February 9–May 27, 2019)*, with *All Men Become Sisters* (Museum Sztuki, Lodz, 2015–2016) on production/reproduction, or with recent exhibitions which are based on looking back at early feminist exhibitions to rethink the present: e.g., *M\A/G\M/A. The body and the word in women's art in Italy and Lithuania From 1965 to today* (Vilnius National Gallery of Art, April 2017 and *Rome: Istituto Centrale per la Grafica 26 January 2018–2 April 2018*) which looked again at Valie Export's exhibition *Magna*

Feminismus (Vienna 1975) or *FRAN (Feminist Renewal Art Network)* Festival of 2017 in celebration of the 1977 *Women's Show* in Adelaide, Australia. The question of legacy becomes more acute when a historical version of feminist art as an avantgarde starts to be collected, as in *The Feminist Avantgarde Sammlung Verbund Collection* focused on only pioneers in the 1970s. As with women's studies, the question of generations or waves is often wrongly tied to decades. The dynamic of two or even three generations pitted against each-other by comparison no longer works, even in one country, region or ethnic group as feminist reassessments of *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* and *We wanted a Revolution: Black Women Artists* (two major touring exhibitions from the USA in 2017–2018, [Fajardo-Hill and Giunta 2017](#); [Morris and Hockley 2017](#)) or *Bread and Roses: Four Generations of Kazakh Women Artists* (Berlin: *Kunstquartier Bethanien*, 2018) recently demonstrate.

Against this considerable creativity in the state of feminist art criticism, art criticism seems stuck with an on or off message: recognising gender as feminism or its neo-liberal mis-readings in its discourses, and it seems every feminist has to rehearse the situation about gender in patriarchal and sexist thinking in the art world or how the works of women artists can only be identified as marginal, ex-centric and exceptions in it. The potential (as feminism's future) or the current state of feminist art criticism, its challenges and contestations, cannot be encapsulated in one article, because it is really another kind of story that feminist art criticism is addressing.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes: *Feminist-Art-Observatory*, KT press. www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-observatory.asp. Online on Mother artists:

<https://artistmotherpodcast.com/>
www.artistresidencyinmotherhood.com
<https://www.procreateproject.com/>
<https://www.motherhousestudios.com>
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