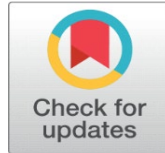
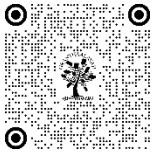


# ILLUSTRATIVE ACTIVISM: THE IMPACT OF FEMINIST ART ON GENDER EQUALITY MOVEMENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The feminist art's main objective was to foster gender equality movements by critiquing traditional roles, fighting gender oppression, and speaking up for social reform using visual storytelling. This research paper is dedicated to appraising the role of feminist art in gender equality movements, embracing its historical growth, theoretical underpinnings, and effect on public perceptions besides activism. This study examines the transformative power of feminist art in promoting equality and shifting attitudes toward gender through a critical and interdisciplinary analysis of the literature and some of the important artworks of the feminist movements.

**Keywords:** Feminist Art, Gender Equality, Art Activism, Art Movement History

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist art has been a highly spirited catalyst in the fight against gender inequality, creating visual narratives to break through entrenched stereotypes, shine a light on gender-based injustices, and support social change. The feminist art movement, emerging prominently in the late 1960s and early 1970s, which came to prominence during the second wave of the feminist movement, looked at bridging the gap between women who are marginalized in the artistic world and men who have had a hand in defining the boundaries of what is art but also addressing the perspectives of male dominance that structures artistic representations historically. It is not only the artistic and aesthetic value that is of feminist art of significance, but

it points also to the arena of the public sphere and decreased gender role incongruence.

The fusion of art and activism is a new means to communicate elaborate messages about gender inequality. Women artists such as Judy Chicago and the Guerrilla Girls created their artworks to criticize and break down the subjugation of women, honour the numerous contributions of women, and demand a more inclusive social order. The main purpose of this research paper is to delve into the historical context of the feminist art movement to study the influence it has had on gender equality in the stage of both the theory and practice of feminism. This study wants to find out the feminist art in conjunction with other venues has brought about gender equality. Moreover, art has introduced new perspectives and shifted societal gender roles to a greater extent. The research focuses on the historical context, theoretical frameworks, and case studies of influential feminist artworks.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FEMINIST ART**

The feminist art movement in the late 60s and first half of the 70s emerged as a significant force in the cultural representation of that period, alongside the second-wave feminist movement existence then, etc. It was at that time when gender inequality was widely recognized and the clamour for social transformation became more rooted and more disruptive. The feminist art postulated chapter determined the female artists' non-entry authorization in the art world, disputing the ultimate male representation that has consistently dominated world culture, and hence produced an opportunity for women to present their perspective and be heard.

### **2.1. EARLY INFLUENCES AND PRECURSORS**

The idea of feminist art may have its origins in prior movements and individual artists who have lived through traditional gender discrepancies and wanted to emphasize women's situations. The example of the suffrage movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century experienced women utilizing the medium of visual art as a political instrument, constructing posters, banners, and propagandist representation tools that would signify women's fight for suffrage (Tickner, 1987). Besides, artists like Frida Kahlo and Georgia O'Keeffe, who didn't come out as feminists directly, were creators of art that contemplated female identity, sexuality, and the body, hence making a clear path for the latter feminist artists (Chadwick, 1990).

### **2.2. THE SECOND-WAVE FEMINIST MOVEMENT**

The feminist movement which gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, was not just a social phenomenon but also a political one that was responsible for the art of the new feminists. This time, feminism was concerned with a lot of issues, such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination, and the portrayal of women in the media and culture. Feminist artists wanted to scrutinize and make changes in the art world which was the fiefdom of male artists, curators, and critics who silenced women or glossed over their contributions (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Back in the early 20th century, Linda Nochlin, the author of the revolutionary essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" (1971) wrote this highly recognized work which centred the topic on the harmful inequalities women faced in the art world. Nochlin argued that the lack of acknowledgement of women artists is not because of their talent but because of the prejudices of society and the lack of women's

participation in artistic teaching and professional activities. This article, on the other hand, inspired change among women artists and scholars and led to art history being relooked at and the rights of women to be remembered (Nochlin, 1971).

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Several theoretical frameworks underpin the analysis of feminist art and its impact on gender equality movements:

- 1) **Feminist Theory:** Through feminist theory, it is possible to view art differently as a reflection of gender inequalities and it is the same mechanism through which women are shown in art, gender division in the art field and feminist art as socio-political gendered issues are created (Hooks, 1984).
- 2) **Social Cognitive Theory:** According to Bandura in Social Cognitive Theory (1986), people come to know how to act and what to believe through observation and modelling. Pictures of women presented by feminist artists function as role models that represent different gender roles and defy stereotyping, thus, spectators change their perceptions and attitudes towards gender equality.
- 3) **Cultural Production Theory:** Cultural production as discussed by (Bourdieu, 1993) reflects how cultural artefacts, like feminist art, are generated and distributed in the framework of societal power relations. It particularly addresses how feminist art disrupts the socially manufactured cultural narrative and brings to the front underrepresented voices.
- 4) **Intersectionality:** A concept introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, examines how various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, and class, intersect and create unique experiences of oppression and privilege.
- 5) **Poststructuralism:** Poststructuralism, particularly the ideas of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, challenges the idea of fixed meanings and emphasizes the fluidity of interpretation and the deconstruction of binary oppositions.

### 4. KEY FIGURES AND MOVEMENTS

Several key figures and movements emerged within feminist art, each contributing to its development and impact:

#### 4.1. JUDY CHICAGO

Among the leading feminist artists is Judy Chicago, and she is best remembered for her remarkable installation, "The Dinner Party" (1974-79). The Dinner Party (Figure 1) is supremely founded on Feminist Theory, especially second wave feminism, intending to shake up and deconstruct patriarchy that has excluded women as agent-based actors in the history and culture narrative. At the centre of the exhibition was a triangular table with 39 place settings, each set in homage to a woman of great historical or mythological significance. Each setting comprised a hand-painted ceramic plate with ceramic flatware, and a napkin with an embroidered runner that referred to symbols and motifs emblematic of or concerning the honoured woman.

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** The Dinner Party, 1974–79, Judy Chicago.

Source <https://artsandculture.google.com/>

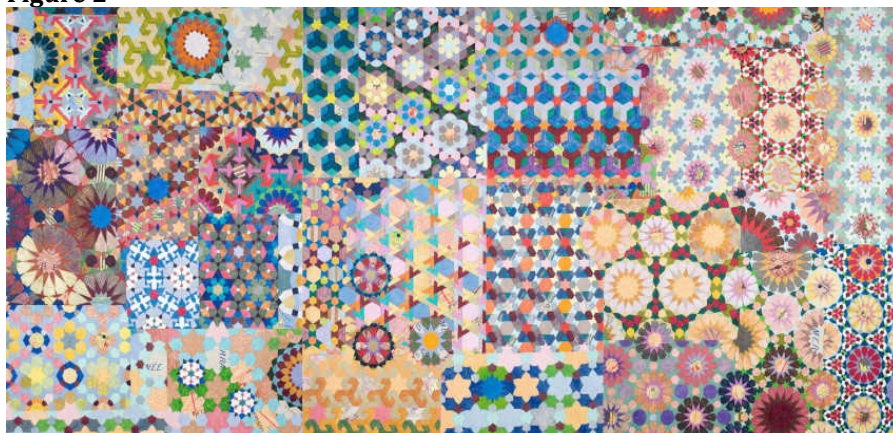
The element of feminist theory "The Dinner Party" enacts is the reclamation and celebration of women whose works and efforts across the course of history have often been summarily buried, ignored, or otherwise undervalued: through the mere action of providing these women with "a seat at the table," Chicago symbolically reclaims their proper place within the scope of history. This resonates with the feminist appraisal of the "great man" theory because it focuses on the achievements of men while blindfolding the purpose of women's contributions (Broude & Garrard, 1994). The Dinner Party primarily discusses the gender subject, though it is very inclusive to the other abstract aspects of identity by involving women of different races, cultures, and backgrounds. The Dinner Party enacts post-structuralist ideas: it dismantles binary oppositions to the point where the boundaries between male/female or high art/low art are broken. Through her incorporation of fine art and elements of craft, Chicago deconstructs the binaries and problematizes their logical and value systems. The triangular table with which her work culminates is but a slant for anybody who questions patriarchal structures and hierarchical thinking. The Dinner Party is a move towards a kind of counter-narrative opposed to the strong mainstream historical discourse that has historically written out women. By cataloguing and celebrating the lives of these women, Chicago creates a new body of knowledge that empowers women and offers a more inclusive historical narrative (Foucault, 1980).

#### **4.2. MIRIAM SCHAPIRO AND THE PATTERN AND DECORATION MOVEMENT**

Miriam Schapiro's role was quite important in the Pattern and Decoration (P&D) art movement which came into being in the mid-1970s as a reaction to the minimalist and conceptual art tendencies of that period. The Pattern and Decoration movement was founded on its penchant for ornamental designs, bright, standout hues, and complicated patterns (Figure 2). It not only embraced folk art and textiles

but was also influenced by wallpaper designs and exotica from other than the Western art world. This movement emerged as a critique of elitism and the compulsive seriousness of minimalism, advocating for the inclusion of beauty, decoration, and the celebration of everyday materials in contemporary art. The main objective of the stated art movement was to bring an end to the rigid distinctions of decoration and fine art and to take the value of ornaments and handicrafts to a higher position, which was often pinned on women's efforts.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** If I Were a Botanist Mediterranean, Joyce Kozloff (P&D Art Movement).

**Source** <https://www.ideelart.com/magazine/pattern-and-decoration-movement>

Schapiro's use of traditional craft techniques and materials was a game-changer in the sphere of women's domestic creativity; it provoked society and brought about a significant shift in the perception of art. Schapiro at first made her mark with the abstract expressionist and hard-edge painting techniques that, back in the mid-20th century, dominated the American art scene. Nevertheless, her association with the feminist movement at the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s was an influential factor in her later art career. Schapiro's *femmeage*, or characteristically a technique of collage, through materials such as fabric and lace, became the medium of her tribute to gendered ideologies involved in the practice of women's domestic creativity and questioned the boundaries between high art and craft (Schapiro & Meyer, 1978). *Femmeages* that Schapiro created were unique in their use of a variety of materials, sometimes presenting a combination of thread, fabric and metal strands. They were indeed built up of patchwork that showcased different intricate patterns and textures as well as vivid hues. Moreover, during the making process, she went beyond straightforward practices and special procedures that might accompany those traditional techniques that involved tasks that were in the past considered feminine such as quilting, embroidery, and appliqué, but were absent from the tenet of fine arts. Some of Schapiro's most notable works exemplify her innovative approach and her commitment to feminist ideals:

**"Anonymous Was a Woman" (1977):** This work (Figure 3) initiated by Schapiro in her *femmeage* series is responsible for recognizing the accomplishments of women who have for long been neglected and discarded in the pages of history. This project is an exquisite mix of a lively assortment of fabrics, paint, and other decorative matters, which emphasizes the aesthetics and complexities of feminine craft (Broude & Garrard, 1994).



**Figure 3**



**Figure 3** Anonymous was a Woman, Miriam Schapiro.

Source <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/>

**"Dollhouse" (1972):** Schapiro worked together with artist Sherry Brody on the "Dollhouse" (Figure 4) which is a large-scale installation that reimagined a traditional dollhouse. The piece featured meticulously crafted miniature rooms decorated with feminist art and symbols, challenging the notion of the domestic sphere as merely a site of oppression for women (Gouma-Peterson, 1990).

**Figure 4**



**Figure 4** Dollhouse, Miriam Schapiro.

Source <https://nmwa.org/>

### 4.3. THE GUERRILLA GIRLS

The Guerrilla Girls are an anonymous feminist artist and activism group, founded in 1985, frustrated by the inequity of opportunities and lack of public recognition towards women artists. This group wanted to bring about change in contemporary art as "guerrillas." Ironically, they donned gorilla masks to hide their real identities while stressing a group identity. Furthermore, pseudonyms alluding to deceased female artists underscored their missionary role: remaining true to the memory and continuing in practice unrecognized women artists (Guerrilla Girls, 1998). Known for their provocative posters, billboards, and public performances, the Guerrilla Girls use humour, satire, and stark visual imagery to denounce and critique systemic inequalities making them more approachable and engaging to the public (Nochlin, 1994). Their work has been important in bringing attention to the underrepresentation and marginalization of women and artists of colour in galleries, museums, and cultural institutions. "We believe that a workspace that is integrated — racially, sexually, culturally and aesthetically — produces the most interesting and potentially innovative art" (Guerrilla Girls, 1998). They aim to "reinvent the F word: feminism" and to expose sexism and racism wherever they find it, from art galleries and museums to Hollywood and politics (Guerrilla Girls, 1998).

**Figure 5**



**Figure 5** Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?, Guerrilla Girls.

Source <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/>

One of the Guerrilla Girls' most famous and earliest campaigns was the 1989 poster (Figure 5), "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" along with the statistics—that less than 5% of the artists in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Modern Art sections were women, while 85% of the nudes were female—next to the reclining nude female figure in a gorilla mask. The image was provocative and stated the case of the gender imbalance in the representation of art, as well as criticized the objectification of women in art, back in 1998 by Guerrilla Girls. The Guerrilla Girls have been fighting issues beyond the art world, particularly Hollywood's gender bias, reproductive rights, and the lack of diversity in academia. In 2006, the project "The Birth of Feminism" applied the traditional formula of a historical timeline to a feminist one: to light up the contributions and struggles of women throughout history. The work epitomizes their approach to bringing art,

activism, and education together to bring about social change (Tickner, 2002). Their existence at the international level has thrown much light on the global nature concerning gender and racial discrimination against arts (Broude & Garrard, 1994). Their work received wide recognition while entering major museums and galleries such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Tate Modern in London. Moreover, although the Guerrilla Girls are critical of these institutions, they used these platforms to amplify their message and continued contesting for change (Doy, 1999).

#### 4.4. BARBARA KRUGER'S "YOUR BODY IS A BATTLEGROUND"

"Your Body is a Battleground" was a work born of its time: at the autumn of a time of huge importance in the history of women's rights in the United States (Figure 6). The late 1980s and early 1990s were marked by heated debates over reproductive rights, culminating in the Supreme Court case *Webster v. Reproductive Health Services* in 1989, which upheld restrictions on abortion and seemed to foreshadow an erosion of the protections established in *Roe v. Wade* the decade before (1973). Feeling the threats that surrounded them, feminist activists built mass demonstrations in defence of women's reproductive freedom (Stabile, 1994). Appropriated imagery and bold, declarative text are hallmarks of Kruger's style.

Figure 6

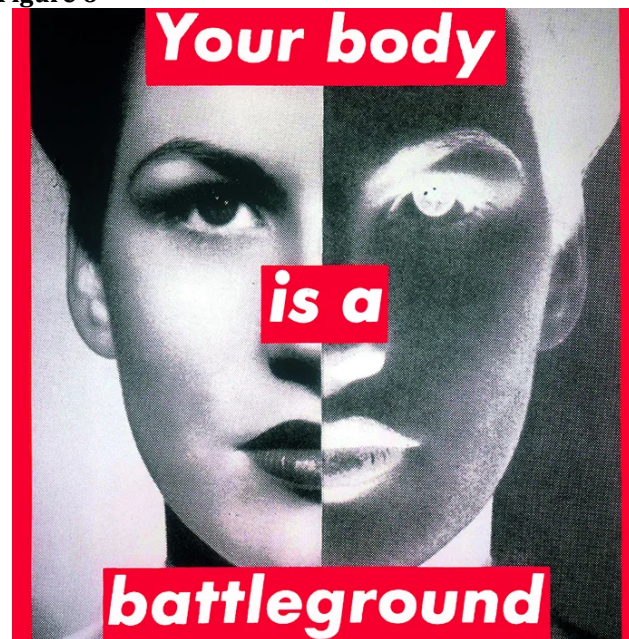


Figure 6 Your body is a battleground, Barbara Kruger.

Source <https://daily.jstor.org/the-history-your-body-is-a-battleground/>

"Your Body is a Battleground" is a split black-and-white photograph of a woman's face, with one half in negative. The stark visual contrast and opposing views and perspectives reflect intense conflict within a single body. An overlaid text, rendered in white on red with Futura Bold, Kruger's signature typeface, states, "Your body is a battleground." This would prove to be one of the strongest statements on the contested status of women's bodies. It politicizes the struggle for bodily autonomy and spotlights political and social battles related to reproductive rights, sexual freedom, and gender equality (Caldwell, 2020). Addressing the viewer with an 'I,' Kruger's work requires personal reflection and engagement on these



very issues (Lusty, 2009). "Your Body is a Battleground" has left an enduring mark on both the art world and feminist activism. A boldness of its visual language and sense of urgency gave it a resonance that has endured as an emblematic representation of women's rights. It has been reproduced many times and referred to in several cultural and political contexts attesting to its continued relevance.

## **5. IMPACT OF FEMINIST ART ON PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS**

### **5.1. CHANGING REPRESENTATIONS AND CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES**

Feminist art has been instrumental in changing the media and cultural representation of women. In terms of traditional art, women have always been the subjects depicted as passive, objectified, and confined to certain roles. Feminist artists sought to disrupt these narratives with works of women as complex, active, and empowered subjects. Research has positively proved that people who view feminist art show more empathy and support toward gender equality (Frueh, 2003). For example, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* reclaimed women's historical contributions with the monumental installation she did to honour significant women from history and mythology. Whereas the provoking work of Barbara Kruger "Your Body is a Battleground" faces the viewer with bold text and striking image, it sets out to confront issues of bodily autonomy and the politicization of women's bodies. In making these themes visually inescapable, Kruger makes the public take a moment to stop and reconsider perceptions and biases (Lusty, 2009).

### **5.2. INFLUENCING POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE**

The visibility and public discourses feminist art has been able to achieve pressured these cultural institutions to really work on gender disparities and take on more inclusive practices. For example, due to the activism of the Guerrilla Girls, museum collections and exhibitions have been labelled and scrutinized, opening opportunities for women and artists of colour. Some institutions responded by starting to re-evaluate their acquisition and exhibition practices to achieve more diversity and representation (Tickner, 2002). Public visibility through feminist artworks in public spaces and on social media has fed into mobilizations concerning legislation around issues such as equal pay, reproductive rights, and ending gender-based violence (Phelan, 1993).

### **5.3. FOSTERING COMMUNITY AND SOLIDARITY**

It has also given women and other oppressed groups an element of community and solidarity. Collaborative projects and participatory initiatives of art have provided a platform for common experiences and collective actions. All these efforts underline the role of community in the fight towards gender equality. In Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*, more than 400 volunteers were involved to highlight the collective nature of the project and the feminist principle of collaboration. It is thus that the notion of feminist art helps underscore the fact that social change remains a communal effort that requires many voices and diverse perspectives (Chicago, 2007).

## 6. CONCLUSION

From challenging age-old stereotypes to raising awareness of systemic inequalities, and inspiring individual and collective acts, feminist art has come a long way in promoting global gender equality movements. Starting with powerful visual statements to arrive at new uses for the media, feminist artists tore apart traditional images of women to give visibility to the multifaceted nature of gender discrimination. The work of Judy Chicago, *The Dinner Party*; Barbara Kruger, *"Your Body is a Battleground"*; and the works of the Guerrilla Girls have worked a change of terms not only in the artistic landscape but also caused important cultural changes and institutional changes. Artists have used their work to further the understanding of the intersectionality of gender with other axes of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality. By stressing the collective aspects of their projects and making an appeal directly to the public, feminist artists could foster solidarity and community, providing a strong underlining of the fact that the struggle for gender equality is never one that should be undertaken in isolation. A new form of visibility and public discourse achieved by feminist art has brought policy changes and greater accountability within cultural institutions toward a more inclusive, fair representation of diverse voices.

In summary, the impact that feminist art had on public perception was very great; it was a stimulus of engraved importance in the gender equality movement. It continues down to this very day, ever replenished with new generations of artists and activists creating counter-narratives for challenging, disrupting, and eventually changing things as they stand. The legacy of feminist art is a testament brimming with timeless power in effecting change and underlining creativity in the truly huge role that visual narratives have played throughout history in the struggle for social justice and equality. Here, the past of feminist art has been the backbone, inspiration, and thus form for what is taking place in its ongoing struggles toward equality.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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