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Chapter 6

Art for art's sake

Let me tell you:

We can't individually 'win' in this world

& simultaneously create another

Together. – Wendy Trevino

We must also broaden our conception of what it means to be creative. At best, one of the most creative activities is being involved in a struggle with other people, breaking out of our isolation, seeing our relations with others change, discovering new dimensions in our lives. – Silvia Federeci

I would rather write nothing at all than propagandise for the world as is. – Anne Boyer

In 1985, Mona Hatoum walks the streets of Brixton barefoot with doc martens wrapped around her ankles. She places one foot in front of the other decisively for an hour. Her performance is captured and edited into a six-minute colour video. *Roadworks* is born. As a member of the Brixton Art Collective, her piece makes a powerful intervention in public space – a space defined by police brutality, the ritual of stop and search and the infrastructure of impoverishment imposed on communities from above. Hatoum wished to bring her art into public

view, to have live interactions with the people who walked the streets beside her. Her performance piece gets beyond the limits of the gallery space, takes art outside, through the puddles that litter the streets. The boots, tightly wrapped around her ankles, signify mechanisms of state control. The same boots were worn by violently racist skinheads and the police: Hatoum invites the audience to make the connection.

cecile emeke's subject is the black flaneur in soft focus. Her mini-documentary series follows members of the African diaspora. One subject speaks directly to the camera about the afterlife of slavery and colonialism in France. The camera lingers and follows, being led by the speaker – it permits us access to a set of ideas, discourses and emotions. Critique is central to emeke's strolling series. It was born out of a desire to document the conversations she had been a part of for years. The flaneur walks forward, unafraid.

Barby Asante's *Declarations of Independence* is being realised as a series of project episodes. It is in keeping with her tradition of mapping stories, utilising the archive through dialogue: a way of speaking in all directions. It has included public installation of a forum at the BALTIC bringing womxn of colour together to 'explore the social, cultural and political agency of women of colour, as they navigate historic legacies of colonialism, independence, migration and the contemporary global socio-political climate.'

* * *

Visual art, painting, sculpture, photography and literature provide a space for us to test our limits. They are mediums for meditation and reflection. Art moves us because it provokes feelings and calls for a response. Whether that response is

repulsion, fear, joy, appreciation, or boredom – art calls for a witness. Perhaps it is this same desire to witness that is the driving force behind the work of feminist activists. As feminists, we are moved by injustice in the world, we work because what is happening around us demands a response. Our responses are varied and aren't limited to the sphere of 'the political.' We do a disservice to the power of art and artistic creation when we assume that it is less important than political intervention, likewise we do ourselves a disservice when we assume that art alone can liberate us.

What happens when we consume a piece of art? We might feel emotional, nostalgic, inspired – a space is opened up where feeling those things isn't silly or self-indulgent but instinctive. The conditions of our lives: the need to work, the expectation of domestic, manual and emotional labour, mean that there is rarely time or space for artistic reflection. But art can abstract us from the demands placed on our bodies at any given time. It can remind us that we do not only exist in relation to our gendered responsibilities: we are not only someone's mother or sister, or carer – we are individuals brimming with sophisticated ideas. Creativity is at the heart of any new world we seek to build. Without the demands placed on our body by capital, by gender and by race – we could be freed up to read, write and to create. Alongside political freedom comes an escape from the social conditioning that deadens our creativity. Every time we engage our creative faculties, we are going against a logic that places work and the nuclear family at the centre of our existence. Art is threatening because when produced under the right conditions, it cannot be controlled. But gatekeepers and cultural institutions have written women, especially black women, outside of the history of artistic creation and freedom.

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

The idea of *Art for Art's Sake* suggests that art has the ability to escape the conditions of its creation, the contexts and motivations it arises from. In many ways, this is a core part of the feminist project; escaping the naming of your body, your personhood, disrupting the inevitability of violence. We are always trying to escape the conditions of our lives and there is no doubt that artistic practice helps us do this. But when we imply that the sole purpose of art is helping rediscover a shared 'humanity' or a way of feeling that is not dependent on time, location and all of the other markers that organise our lives, we blunt the knife that might help us tear these markers down. Art is best utilised as a weapon, a writing back, as evidence that we were here. Apolitical approaches, or approaches that seek to deaden the resistant potential of artistic practice are merely another mechanism through which the status quo is reproduced.

'Can we separate the art from the artist?' is a tired debate often rehashed when feminists note the violent origins of otherwise beautiful creations. While it is possible to have a positive experience of art produced by an individual who has perpetrated harm, perhaps it is more important to realise that art alone cannot repair harm. If we want art that reflects the true complexity of our lives and the range of human emotion, then we must eradicate the harmful conditions in which we live. As much as artists may run away from the political underpinnings of their work, it haunts them. Art is powerful, but it is not powerful enough to undo centuries of colonial domination or climate catastrophe. It is only as effective as we allow it to be. We give art its agency and healing ability: we enable it to speak to the painful, shameful and most delicate aspects of our lives. That is a responsibility, one that we all have a role in upholding. Although the experience of witnessing art may feel context-less and universal, the idea that it can cross difference and get to the

root of what it means to be human fails to recognise that in the world we live in; there are whole swathes of the population who have been excluded from the scope of full humanity.

Feminists know all too well that rejecting the differences between us in the search for a binding universal is a project doomed for failure. Caribbean intellectual, Sylvia Wynter wrote 'I write, and writing is the impulse of my life. I am neither writer nor critic, neither playwright nor novelist. I am a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American. I write not to fulfil a category, fill an order, supply a consumer, but to attempt to define what is this thing to *be* – a Jamaican, a West Indian, an American.'¹ Instead of assuming that art helps overwrite difference, we might pay attention to the way it enables us to articulate how difference underscores our lives. The specificity of artistic creation reveals something about the injustice that is deeply embedded in the way we live. It is also a lifeline for others who are attempting to journey through a world characterised by oppression. Art that grapples with and documents survival, as well as contributing to movements that seek to make the world more just, can propose revolutionary ideas. When women and non-binary people make art with the intention of raising consciousness, they are not only contributing to the feminist fight, they are demonstrating that feeling is a way of knowing and a powerful starting point for building a political framework. Affect, the ability to be moved, should never be underestimated. It is what brings us to feminist politics and what sustains us.

The project of building a new world and combating the harm produced in this one is rarely viewed as creative. Political endeavours are separated from the mysterious nature of 'creativity'. But,

¹ Sylvia Wynter, 'We Must Learn to Sit Down Together and Talk About a Little Culture: Reflections on West Indian Writing and Criticism,' Institute of Jamaica, (1968).

in rethinking the purpose of art, it is helpful to think about the long tradition of feminists using all kinds of creative mediums to make something out of their activist work. Art is a tool for feminist propaganda; it can help us craft a future that does not yet exist. As feminists, remaining attentive to the artistic and cultural conversations that dominate public life is as significant as remaining attentive to the political narratives that are circulating; both inform one another. That space that art opens up reminds us that despite the violence we are subjected to, there are still parts of our minds that cannot be controlled.

Who gets to make art?

A series of portraits of a black woman, plain clothing, a head wrap. The images intend to explore spirituality and rituals of her Gambian heritage. At points her face is obscured, her hands covering her eyes. The photographs point to a lineage. They are a reworking of pre-colonial subjectivity. The edges are faded, the colouring mimicking that of nineteenth century portraiture. An attempt to meet history. A way of glancing backwards to the women whose stories we do not know, a nod to ancestors, a claiming of place. A commentary on the past, present and future.

The Venice Biennale is an arts organisation based in Venice, which is home to the Art Biennale, a contemporary visual art exhibition that is hosted biannually. The prestige of the exhibition has launched the careers of many artists, their work subsequently receiving critical acclaim. In early 2017, in the diaspora Pavilion, Khadija's Saye's series of photographs entitled *Dwelling: In this space we breathe* were displayed. A few months later in June, Saye died in the Grenfell tower fire. She was only 24 years of age. The divide between politics and art is not real. It

is politics that dictates who creates art, how it is consumed and sold, the conditions in which it is created, the subjectivities that dominate it. Poor women do not get to make art: the fact that Saye's work could be displayed in one of the most prestigious arenas in the world, while government neglect ensured that she would meet death in a circumstance that could so easily have been avoided calls us to wake up to the cruelty of inequity. As feminists, if we wish to see a world of art and creativity, then we must remove the barriers to that creativity and the systems that kill artists. We must dismantle the systems of poverty, racism, incarceration, impoverishment that leave so many women unable to fulfil their creative potential. Art requires will. But it also requires, as writer Virginia Woolf recognises, a room of one's own. A set of social and financial circumstances that enable creativity to take place. The question of who gets to make art is inseparable from questions of liberation and freedom.

In the UK, working class women artists are not only under-represented, but actively excluded from the opportunities, internships and mentoring schemes that might equip them with the skills and resources to develop their artistry. Black women artists suffer under the burden of representation set by liberal arts organisations that refuse to consider their work beyond narrowly conceived ideas of 'identity' or as markers of cultural diversity.² But feminist art and the creative process belong to all of us. The task is not to recover creativity from the gatekeepers but to expand the scope of what counts as artistic creation. Navigating the world with a feminist consciousness requires creativity, it requires innovative responses to being consumed, surveilled, violated, denigrated, mocked and humiliated. But we rarely call ourselves artists: we rarely call resistance, art.

² www.theguardian.com/culture/2019/feb/12/english-arts-bodies-slow-to-become-more-diverse-report-shows (last accessed 03/2019).

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There is that Toni Cade Bambara quote, 'The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible . . . It's really important to think about the liberatory potential of your work, that doesn't mean it has to be didactic. It can be achieved by who you choose to humanise, who you choose to centre, the questions that you ask. Artists play a big role in asking questions and imagining freedom dreams beyond limitations . . . the artist's role is to think beyond their time.'

Momtaza Mehri, essayist, researcher and former Poet Laureate for young people, tells me. By making the revolution irresistible, the artist breathes life into movements and provides an added dimension that political discourses can sometimes fail to capture. An alliance between art and politics enables us to not only expand the scope of creativity: it gives more women the license to understand the artistic as well as political circumstances of their lives. In her own work, Mehri is interested in the generative potential of dissent:

I'm interested in artistic beef. I love when it opens up room for discussion and it's interesting and generative. I love the debates the black art movement had about Black nationalism versus third worldism vs black internationalism . . . I love that they had arguments about which journals to submit to, The New York Times versus Underground black arts journals.

The tension created by political literary and artistic disagreements highlights how important critique is to movements for liberation. In the UK, young publications like *The White Pube*, run by Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad are democratising art criticism by removing it from the grips of institutions and placing it back into the hands of young feminist

thinkers attentive to race, gender, class and the activist potential of the art we consume. Their online art criticism follows the tradition of young women choosing non-traditional forms of media to counter elitist gatekeeping. *The White Pube* belongs to a history of radical print and online cultures commandeered by young women who used art as a means of self-actualisation. The pamphlet has a coveted place in feminist history, as does the radical printing press. The emergence of zines during punk movements in 90s London and New York allowed complete editorial freedom and a place to make art without any rules. This legacy is continued in British publications like *OOMK* (One of My Kind) and *The Khidr Collective*, who choose to remain independent, flexible and give young artists a place to showcase work outside of institutional approval.

Insurrectionary artistic practice is a necessary call to action for feminists. But women's concerns have never been identical and so feminist artistic practice does not have a linear history, much like the feminist movement. Much of 'second wave' American visual art made by white women was centred on the body, sex and rebelling against domestic space because these were the priorities of the middle class feminist movement at the time. Black women artists have always had different priorities, no matter what generation they belong to. African American artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Lorna Simpson and Betye Saar and Black British artists Lubiana Himid, Claudette Johnson and Maud Salter focused on questions of black women's subjectivity and interiority, social meanings of blackness and the afterlife of slavery. Mehri says,

We have to find a way to analyse things in a way that learns from the past, which is why intergenerational dialogue between feminists is so important. There's a cultural memory

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that gets lost every time you surround yourself only with people who are your age.

A glance back into history of popular and legitimised art demonstrates how hierarchies that exist in everyday life are reproduced. It forces us to consider whose art is held up as evidence of the movement and whose work is forgotten. Perhaps most pertinently, does the most admired feminist art threaten social and political order? If the purpose of art in a feminist context is to raise consciousness, then perhaps the most important art movements are those locked away in the archive, movements that took place outside the world of mainstream recognition.

For Mehri, the influence of feminism on her work is structural, rather than a topic of concern, it is intrinsic to her understanding of the world:

A feminist framework, if it does the work of clarifying and not obscuring, has done its job. Clarifying the machinery of our lives as woman with all our identifying markers, clarifying the role we play in dismantling the machinery of exploitation.

Perhaps the artist can say and do things that the political activist cannot, but the prestigious world of visual art and literature can often remove us from the reality of the life-saving work happening on the ground in the communities we inhabit. A well-known literary journal or gallery may in some ways be a sacred space but it can also serve as a vehicle for depoliticisation. Art must be democratic to be useful, when I ask Momtaza about the future, she tells me:

I think about the order and episteme we live under right now, it's so totalising that it is hard to think about what is beyond

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it . . . What is poetry outside of capitalism? I can't tell you because I've never experienced that. But I do know that more people will be able to be poets. I do know that the form might change and be more accessible to people.

A democratic vision of art is one where creativity belongs to the most exploited, the women who do not immediately spring to mind when we hear the word 'artist.'

The archive

Soweto blues – they are killing all the children/Soweto blues – without any publicity/Soweto blues – oh, they are finishing the nation/Soweto blues – while calling it black on black.

When Miriam Makeba lent her voice to Hugh Masekela's protest song about the brutal police response to the Soweto Uprising in 1976, it became a rallying cry for an entire generation. This example from the archive demonstrates how powerful a feminist use of art can be. Women's voices and bodies often become symbols of resistance but their vital contributions to political movements are lost. Makeba used her voice to expose the violence of the apartheid regime. Feminists can seize control of the public imagination and command a global conversation using a variety of forms. This is only one example of how artistic resistances can reach others across contexts. It reminds us that contemporary feminism has a long legacy to draw from.

Our practical struggle become[s] what it must be: the realisation of our basic principles in the process of social life and the embodiment of our general principles in practical every day action. And only under these conditions do we fight in the

sole permissible way for what is at any time 'possible'. – Rosa Luxemburg

In *Art of the Possible: Towards an Antifascist Feminist Front*, Artist Sanja Ivekovic invited writer Angela Dimitrakaki and theorist Antonia Majaca to create an audio intervention to accompany her installations *Monument to Revolution* (2017) in Athens, Greece. The piece responds to the monument created by Ludwig Mies der Rohe's in honour of revolutionaries Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibknet in Berlin, which was destroyed by the Nazis in the 1930s. The two hour long clip is a compilation of reflections, words and sounds from over 30 contributors engaged in the fight against fascism across the world including Kurdistan, Mexico, France, Indonesia and Singapore. It is an attempt to document a struggle as it happens, to build an internationalist feminist framework able to respond to fascist violence, forge bonds of solidarity, recognise the specificity of the moment we are currently in and the history that created it.

The audio clip is an example of the ways feminist activists and artists have collaborated to make meaningful public interventions that refuse to lose sight of the urgency of the current moment. It is also an attempt to rewrite the history of revolution, to acknowledge that women have been responsible for creating and sustaining movements. As well as exposing the most prominent features of fascist regimes, the clip explores possibility and futurity and affirms the impact of recognising feminist goals as something that are entirely realisable. It is a mini-manifesto, a consciousness-raising tool and rousing reminder that we are alive now, in this political moment and it is our responsibility to respond. 'To speak as if it were possible to have a voice in common, to speak as if it were possible that that voice in common could gain momentum,' one voice in the recording says.

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Feminist art can call us to attention: making us want to stand up and be counted. That indescribable feeling that marks dissent: protest, the speaking up, coming out and refusing to be a good woman, a good girl, a good capitalist subject. When feminist art is able to bridge the gap between grassroots movements and the theory that commands them, a stronger coalitional politics emerges. Art alone cannot beat the rise of fascism but it is one of the many tools that we can use to destabilise it.

Art for Art's Sake cannot exist while any of us are unfree. Feminists have long rejected the idea because they know that every artistic creation has a social and political meaning. They have instead used art for the sake of a political vision, art for the sake of our lives and our happiness. Assata Shakur's famous refrain 'It is our duty to fight for our freedom/it is our duty to win/we must love and support one another/we have nothing to lose but our chains,' repositions the fight against injustice as a task we are obliged to partake in. Feminist art is moralising and instructive because this is necessary ammunition when our lives are on the line. It helps us clarify our position and make sense of what it is we are imagining. When we engage in political work, we do so for every artist that cannot become an artist because they are black, poor, uneducated, disabled, trans, because structural barriers mean that their lives are already mapped out for them. We use art to fight political battles in order to create the conditions for unbridled creativity. So that we might all be able to live artistic lives: lives of freedom.