

# Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden

## *Making Ourselves Visible*

Recently, we have been told by a number of prominent feminists from various generations that feminism is dead. We are troubled that this is their perception when we see so much life in it still. In an effort to resuscitate feminist discourse, we want to explore publicly the question: *what does feminism look like today?*

But this question is immediately complicated by a semantic stumbling block. It seems to us that the predominant understanding of “feminism” is coded by a body of works, actions, and texts produced in the 1960s and '70s, such that it has become nearly impossible to talk about contemporary feminism in a way that doesn't tie it to an historical moment. The tendency to treat these decades as a feminist ground zero centralizes the

discourse and limits its meaningful articulation to a handful of strategies and practices exemplified by so-called “feet in the streets” activism. In other words, the feminist practices and attitudes cultivated in the '60s and '70s have become the gauge by which all subsequent actions have been judged. This produces a hierarchy within feminism that fails to consider its multifaceted relationship to the ground on which it is enacted. In other words, the unidirectional relationship between the past as precedent and the present as its protégé obscures the myriad pressures that led to the dispersal of feminism and, as such, the situation we are confronting today.

A common narrative of second-wave feminism goes something

### Authors' Note

This text is part of an ongoing project exploring contemporary feminist practices by creating public platforms for negotiating the problematics of feminism today. It is an excerpt from a longer, in-progress inquiry into blind spots within the feminist movement to contradictions between its politics and their implementation.

like this: born from the radical movements of the '60s, feminism espoused a transformative political project that deepened and extended our understanding of oppression and subjection by suggesting these things are not always self-evident or even visible, but tightly woven into the fabric of capitalist culture. Bifurcating the New Left's focus on the political economy and class-based oppression, feminism highlighted a multitude of social injustices that had previously been tolerated, overlooked, or naturalized. The wide-reaching and interrelated nature of oppressive structures targeted by feminism led to the development of the movement's “intersectionist” approach. With this, feminism's focus shifted from gender-based oppression located in male persons to patriarchal positions and structures that bare unevenly along lines of not only gender, but also race, class, sexuality, nationality, and so on.

In short, the crux of second-wave feminism was a critique that integrated the economic and political concerns of the New Left with a cultural account of the systemic character of subordination in capitalist culture. In the '60s and '70s feminists secured the movement by identifying and challenging the many oppressive structures in capitalism, an inherently patriarchal system. Paradoxically then, the continued dominance of the '60s and '70s narrative actually works against at least one of the principal goals of second wave feminism, which was to rethink oppression and injustice as a multi-dimensional matrix, by instead turning it into a monastic symbol. As Roslyn Deutsche has pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the unifying impulse of left melancholia is at odds here

with feminism's goals of interrogating unified subjectivities and heroic modes of being.

One can clearly see this at work in statements made at “The Feminist Future,” a sold-out two-day symposium organized by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in January of 2007. While the ostensible subject matter of “The Feminist Future” was the state of the movement going forward, an odd foreclosure of that exact topic recurred throughout the event. Statements such as these abounded: “A contemporary understanding of the feminist in art must necessarily look to the late 1960s and 1970s” (Connie Butler),<sup>2</sup> “I thought I would talk about the way that I saw that women were presented in the visual field...and I'm going to go quite far back in time, to the '60s and '70s, to talk about this” (Martha Rosler),<sup>3</sup> or “This paper places the feminist future in dialogue with particular episodes from the feminist past” (Richard Meyer).<sup>4</sup> We have the disconcerting feeling, in witnessing such approaches, that we are invisible to them.

It is perhaps inevitable that the future should be so far out of reach, given that “The Feminist Future” symposium was following on the heels of a spate of popular feminist retrospectives. “Documenting a Feminist Past” at MoMA, “Part Object, Part Sculpture” at the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, and “WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution” organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and presented at P.S.1 in New York all focused on feminist art practices from the 1960s on. The opening of “Global Feminisms” (though not a retrospective in and of itself) marked the inaugural exhibition of the Sackler Center