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# Our Bodies, Online

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Carmen Winant

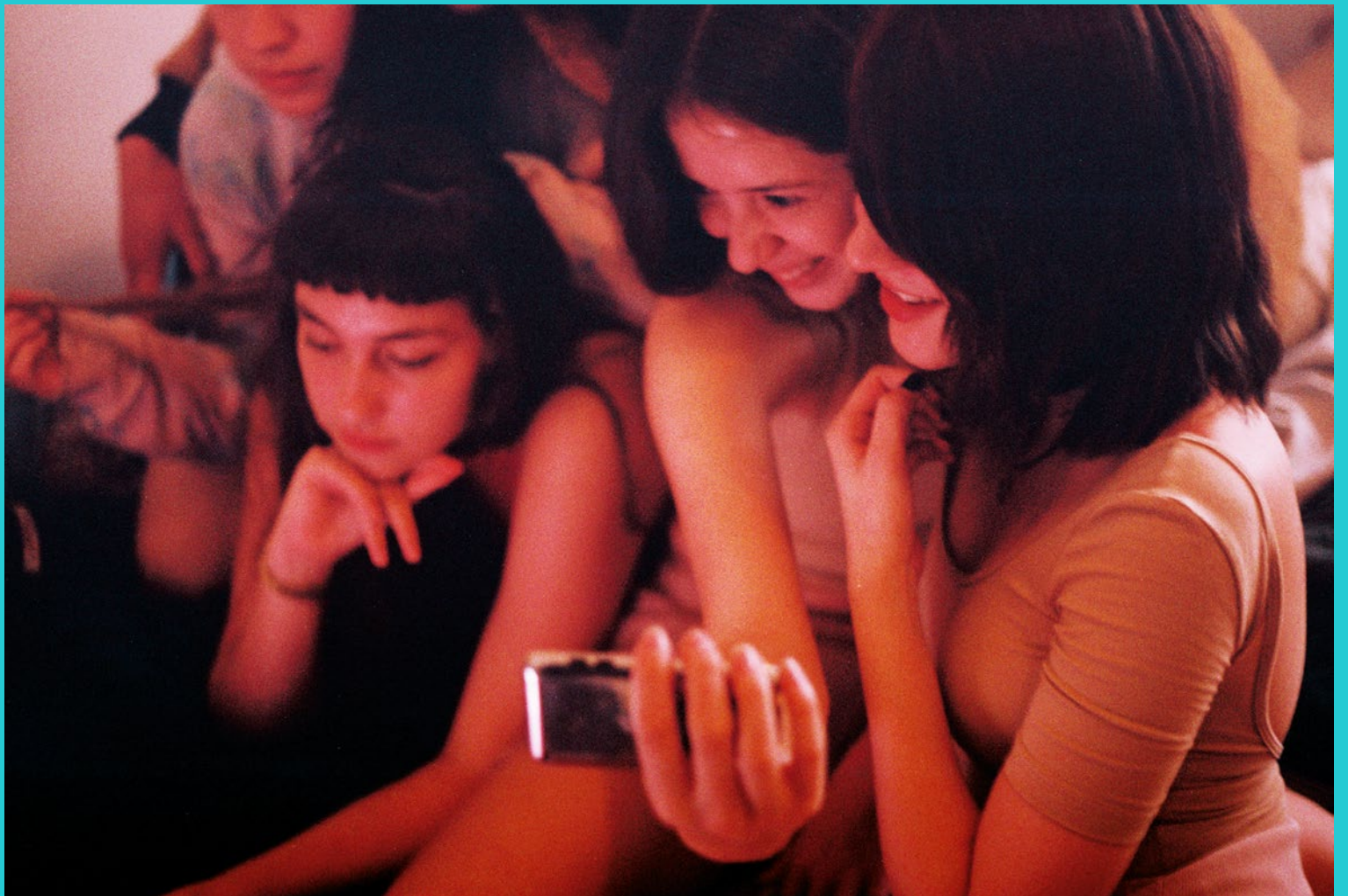
What are the qualifications of being a feminist artist today? This is an impossible question, which is, in many ways, the point. One of the defining doctrines of third-wave feminism (or fourth-wave feminism, or postfeminism, or whatever you call our current moment) is its persistent unwillingness to be defined. Whether you make abstract photographs or stag films, label your work feminist, and it is.

As a feminist contrivance, this idea is either liberating or naive, depending on whom you ask, and, likely, in which decade you were born. In either case, it's a jagged break from the second-wave feminist art movement that predated it—a movement that adhered, by its very design, to a strict set of ideological guidelines. Much like the activist organizations from which this movement grew (which aimed to achieve specific goals like legalizing abortion, passing the Equal Rights Amendment, establishing equal pay and free, universal childcare), feminist art of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s was determined to raze oppressive structures with a new and defined set of rules all its own. “The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,” Audre Lorde famously declared in 1979. According to both the political and creative arms of the movement, any device that utilized patriarchal means was pointedly unfeminist and thereby an inadmissible agent of real social change.

Though born from a desire to achieve equality, some of these mandates around what feminism could and could not be eventually became exclusive, limiting, and problematic. Activist groups such as New York Radical Women came to regularly vote out their leaders for being “unsisterly,” leaders of the National Organization for Women distanced themselves from lesbian feminists—whom Betty Friedan labeled a “lavender menace”—and male children were banned from feminist separatist communes such as Womyn’s Land. At its zenith, this essentialist dogma thwarted the momentous gains of the second-wave movement. At the same time, artists like Betty Tompkins and Anita Steckel, whose paintings were considered

Top:  
Petra Collins, from the  
series *The Teenage Gaze*,  
2010–15

Bottom:  
Petra Collins, from the  
series *Selfie*, 2013–16  
© the artist





Mayan Toledano,  
*Emma*, 2015



Above:  
Mayan Toledano,  
*Sherris in Palm Springs*,  
2014

Left:  
Mayan Toledano, *Lindsay*,  
*Long Island*, 2015

All photographs courtesy  
the artist





too explicitly pornographic and thereby aligned with the patriarchal gaze, were largely excluded from the pale. Hannah Wilke was criticized for being too stereotypically beautiful (and thereby narcissistic) to represent her work's feminist politics.

Almost half a century later, Instagram, the rise of selfie culture, American Apparel aesthetics, and amateur pornography—channels of visual communication that would have been impossible to fathom within the context of the pre-Internet women's liberation movement—have come into being. An emerging guard of young, female photographers has carved out a new brand of feminism with a new set of definitions: Amalia Ulman created “hipster lifestyle” porn, to be viewed only within a gallery setting titled *International House of Cozy* (2015). Arvida Byström's series *There Will Be Blood* (2012) pictures women in their lacy, period-stained underwear (she also regularly photographs herself and other young women in various states of undress in front of bright, pastel backdrops). Molly Soda's project *Should I Send This?* (2015) is comprised of titillating, seminude, and headless selfies that the artist took but never forwarded on to romantic partners. Audrey Wollen's series *Repetition* (2014–15) features the artist posing nude or seminude as she imitates and embodies historic works of art made by men such as Bas Jan Ader, Botticelli, and Velázquez. Mayan Toledano's photographs for her brand Me and You—cocreated with Julia Baylis—are of young women posing topless in bed while wearing Me and You's most recognizable product: women's underwear that has the word *feminist* printed across the backside in pink. These artists frequently collaborate, curate one another into exhibitions, tag and promote each other on social media, and appear as subjects in each other's work. The commercial, editorial, and creative ventures are part of a larger, allied cohort that is rapidly gaining popular visibility.

Among them, Petra Collins's work is perhaps the most prominent. In addition to a creative practice—a recent project is of adolescent girls in the process of taking selfies—Collins counts *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Wonderland*, and *i-D* magazines as editorial clients, and has shot advertising work for Levi's, Adidas, Stella McCartney, and Calvin Klein. Across all of these practices, her 35mm images are recognizable as crude and dreamy. Collins's use of gel filters, pastel palettes, and high grain is uncannily reminiscent of Bob Guccione's signature *Penthouse* magazine style, and likewise owes a debt to Ryan McGinley (for whom she has posed on numerous occasions) and Nan Goldin before that. However, unlike Goldin's women, whose whole bodies project a wild and gleeful pathos, Collins—when she shoots commercially—often zooms in on her subject's breasts, lips, or asses, their bodies bathed in warm, gauzy light. For all their sexual potency, Goldin's photographs of Greer Lankton and Cookie Mueller don't resemble other popular images of women; they feel at once beaten down and ferocious. Collins's photographs of female subjects for fashion magazines, in which models pose in sauna-soaked underwear and lacy negligees, are notably more domesticated.

Yet Collins consistently makes the case for her work as being driven by her deeply rooted feminist ideals, as do many—if not all—of the photographers of this cohort. The question, then, of what qualifies work as feminist art in today's cultural landscape circles closely around this group of artists. Byström, the Swedish photographer and self-defined “strident feminist” who has posed for Toledano and collaborated with Collins, told *Dazed*, “You can't just make ‘feminist art’ because feminism is more like a spectrum of things; it changes and depends on its context.” This notion—that feminism can be whatever you want it to be, and that there are as many feminisms as there are women—appears to sharply contradict the exacting boundaries and idealistic aspirations of the preceding movement. It is, perhaps, the prevailing definition of feminism embraced by Collins and her peers.



**Top:**  
Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections* (Instagram Update, 2nd July 2014), 2014

**Bottom:**  
Amalia Ulman, *Excellences & Perfections* (Instagram Update, 19th May 2014), (*I wish I was paler*), 2014  
Courtesy the artist, James Fuentes, and Arcadia Missa

## An emerging guard of young, female photographers has carved out a new brand of feminism with a new set of definitions.

Prestel, the publisher of *Babe*—a 2015 Collins-curated book that includes work by over thirty artists who have been part of her online collective, the Ardorous—promotes the collection as “reflect[ing] an all-accepting, affirming, distinct point of view that teens and young women everywhere can respond to.” Barnes & Noble blurbs Collins as “leading the way in a contemporary girl power revolution that proves feminism and sexuality aren’t mutually exclusive,” and various places online promote the book as “help[ing] us to refocus and remember that we are all a part of the struggle together.” This publisher-scripted language is not far removed from the manner in which the photographers and their surrounding community describe their work. For instance, Collins did an interview with the site StyleLikeU titled “Sorry Not Sorry, Women Have Body Hair” (and subtitled, “Another female power house is stripping down in the name of self-love, femininity, and body acceptance”) while slowly disrobing down to her underwear. Posted on YouTube, it drew several comments by men bemoaning the fact that she never removes her bra.

In her essay “Censorship and the Female Body,” published in 2013 by the *Huffington Post*, Collins rebukes Instagram’s decision to remove her profile based on a photograph she posted showing her crotch with some exposed pubic hair, writing:

I know having a social media profile removed is a 21st century privileged problem—but it is the way a lot of us live. These profiles mimic our physical selves and a lot of the time are even more important. They are ways to connect with an audience, to start discussion, and to create change.... To all the young girls and women, do not let this discourage you, do not let anyone tell you what you should look like, tell you how to be, tell you that you do not own your body. Even if society tries to silence you keep on going, keep moving forward, keep creating revolutionary work, and keep this discourse alive.

Collins shows real dedication to challenging censorship and promoting body positivity through her work (and is aware that her position is a privileged one), which is focused on reclaiming the female body by utilizing the techniques and tools of the male gaze. Censorship is, of course, a crucial feminist issue, as is sexual expression, freedom, and agency—all addressed head-on by these photographers. The characterization of this particular case of censorship being a “21st century privileged problem” that nevertheless represents “the way a lot of us live,” though, hints at the paradox inherent in much of this work. Can an inclusive and far-reaching feminism develop within the confines of a Western-minded social-media universe that upholds the status quo of capitalism—the begetter of privilege and the patriarchy alike?

If the rhetoric surrounding this kind of imagery is under question, the images themselves flirt with something undeniably interesting: the tension between provocation and objectification. Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” now almost four decades old, might have been written about this very charge:

The erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation, nor succumb to the belief that sensation is enough. The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic. But pornography is a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling. Pornography emphasizes sensation without feeling.





Audrey Wollen,  
*Rokeby Venus, repetition  
of Rokeby Venus by  
Diego Velázquez, 2015*  
Courtesy the artist



Locating the boundary between the erotic-as-power and the erotic-as-bondage can be a complex task, as is manifest in a recent project by Amalia Ulman. For *Excellences & Perfections* (2014), she posted hundreds of hypersexual, blank-faced selfies on Instagram, accruing up to six hundred likes on a single photograph. In describing how young women now self-present in images on the Internet, Peggy Orenstein's book *Girls and Sex* (2016) aptly pins the type of account that Ulman's spoofs as "a commercialized, one-dimensional, infinitely replicated, and, frankly, unimaginative vision of sexiness ... [set to] perform rather than to feel sensuality." By the time that Ulman eventually revealed that she was playing a fictional character in an act of cultural sendup, she had accrued almost 90,000 new followers. In a moment in which feminist art is defined primarily by its immediate context and authorial claims (Ulman herself does not identify her practice as "feminist" or ascribing to any other political categorization), this work—which has been digitally archived by Rhizome at the New Museum and will be exhibited at the Tate Modern this year—could be considered incisive or lacking rigor. In any case, by reveling in the exhibitionism she seeks to critique, Ulman's work gets to have it both ways.

Feminist curator and critic Helen Molesworth told me recently that "in addition to the understanding that feminism is structured on absence—the absence of women's experience, of bodies of color—a feminist is someone who is aware that you can't change the patriarchy just by inserting women into it." Is the fact that it was made by a woman enough to qualify it as progressive or political? Would we read these same images differently if Terry Richardson or Richard Kern—a mentor of Collins—made them? Is it possible to at once challenge codified systems of feminized beauty while photographing for the very fashion magazines that reinforce them? Can feminism successfully protest sexism through the personal choice of self-objectification, using what Zoë Heller described skeptically in her *New York Review of Books* essay "'Hot' Sex & Young Girls" as "the emancipatory possibilities of hotness"?

When untangling the complex questions posed by the work of these artists, it's important to recognize that these women *deliberately* take control of the master's tools (porn, Instagram, high-end fashion advertising, lifestyle magazines, other corporate

and commercial entities) to dismantle the master's house (patriarchal expectations of gender). Let's remember that Audre Lorde and the antipornography activist Andrea Dworkin, who passed away in 1992 and 2005, respectively, would have been old enough to be grandmothers to this new generation of feminists. Movements evolve and revolt against themselves; axioms shift over time and in relationship to culture. Rather than ask this group of artists to resemble the feminists that came before them, critics, consumers, and practitioners alike should be promoting an unabashed and exacting dialogue around the politics of looking and image making.

This is a generation that has had access to mobile devices and image-centric web platforms from preadolescence as a part of daily life; this technological and commercial divide naturally shapes their creative instincts, and sets them apart from previous makers. Molesworth concluded our conversation by reminding me, "Though there are some basic operating principles and values, there is no *one* theoretical position on feminism that works for everyone." So long as it is self-critically vested in challenging modes of power, feminism can, and must, be a continually evolving phenomenon. No matter the generation of feminism to which one ascribes, expansive and rigorous definitions do exist; let's set about reclaiming them.

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