

Feminisms: Plural and Evolving

Key Idea

The term Feminism represents a set of ideas which have been developing, evolving, diversifying and becoming increasingly complex and nuanced since the nineteenth century, however, it is generally agreed that the core idea of feminism is to achieve equality between the sexes. At different times in history new and distinct versions of Feminist thought have come into being, and these changes in thought are known as waves. First-Wave Feminism began in the 1900s, followed by Second-Wave Feminism (1960s-1980s), Third-Wave Feminism (1990s-2013), and finally, Fourth-Wave Feminism (2011-now) which characterises the contemporary Feminism developing and evolving today.

Each of these waves came about because of a specific set of ideas and priorities that were different from the previous ones. These 'waves' fall into four generally agreed categories, each associated with different periods of history. Whilst one wave can be understood to update the ideas of the last, this does not mean the previous ideas go away, rather, each type of Feminism sits next to the others, and that is why it is very difficult to give a singular definition of Feminism.

This complex status for Feminism, and what is meant by the term Feminist Art, explains the approach that the curatorial team have taken to assembling the exhibition *Unfinished Business* at ACCA. The exhibition was curated by a group of experts, each with different ideas of which artists and artworks represent Australian Feminism in the best, most compelling ways. Hence, the exhibition is an extensive, diverse journey through many ideas and expressions of Feminism through art, and even then does not claim to represent all possible angles.

In 1902 Australia became the second nation worldwide (New Zealand was the first, in 1876) to give women the parliamentary vote for which Suffragettes in other parts of the world were still campaigning.¹ It is important to note, however, that the Indigenous population, male and female, were not granted the vote until 1962.

Key Definitions

Feminism

1. The theory of the political, economic and social equality of the sexes.
2. Organised activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.²

Patriarchy

1. Social organization marked by the supremacy of the father in the clan or family, the legal dependence of wives and children, and the reckoning of descent and inheritance in the male line; *broadly*: control by men of a disproportionately large share of power.
2. A society or institution organised according to the principles or practices of patriarchy.

Matriarchy

1. A family, group, or state governed by a matriarch (a woman who rules or dominates a family, group or state).
2. A system of social organisation in which descent and inheritance are traced through the female line.

Key Quotes

*"[i]t is hardly even possible to give a definition of feminism that every feminist will agree with"*³

The National Organization for Women (NOW) at their 1967 conference called for:

"equal employment opportunity [to] be guaranteed to all women, as well as men"

"the right of women to be educated to their full potential equally with men ... eliminating all discrimination and segregation by sex"

*"the right of women in poverty to secure job training, housing, and family allowances on equal terms with men"*⁴

*"It has also been argued that there is no feminist art but only art that can be read as feminist..."*⁵

*"Feminist art is work that is rooted in the analyses and commitments of contemporary feminism and that contributes to a critique of the political, economic and ideological power relations of contemporary society. It is not a stylistic category nor simply any art produced by women."*⁶

Timeline

FIRST WAVE FEMINISM 19TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURIES

Key Priorities

- The right to women's suffrage - the right to vote alongside men.
- The right to education, wages, independence, property rights, non-patriarchal religion.

Before this movement women were not able to have a say in political issues. This meant that all political and legal decisions on issues in society were made by men – including those directly affecting women – their right to agency in society, their employment, the right to own property, and will over their bodies. This situation, whereby women were disallowed from contributing to discussions about their own rights, was the fundamental motivation for this first wave of feminism.

Quotes:

*"(In the 19th century) Art was open to women in a way that the institutionalized professions of politics, religion, law and (until the 1870s) medicine were not. The idea of the woman artist, if increasingly familiar, was, however, still deeply uncomfortable. The serious pursuit of art was understood to be incompatible with the demands of femininity, just as the attributes of femininity were incompatible with the production of good art."*⁷

*"From 1907, after the foundation of the Artists' Suffrage League (followed in 1909 by the Suffrage Atelier), women lent their artistic skills to the propaganda of an elaborate political campaign... Until then women, in flight from the newly insistent and inferior category of the female artist, tended to concede the conventional wisdom that 'art has no sex'."*⁸

Key Artists

- Lady Butler
- Henrietta Rae
- Annie Louisa Swynnerton

SECOND WAVE FEMINISM

1960S TO LATE 1980S

Key Priorities

- Women's sexuality outside of reproduction
- Attitudes toward family and the division of labour in care
- The workplace including the roles women could perform
- Reproductive rights including abortion and contraceptive access
- Domestic abuse and recognising this as a crime that should be treated as such
- De facto relationship recognition outside of patriarchal marriage institution
- Legal inequalities including rights to property and money especially in the case of separation or divorce
- The establishment of support centres for battered women and rape victims, and women's shelters.⁹

The later part of this period is marked by a recognition of diversity amongst feminists. The Black Feminist movement, for example, responded to sexism within the civil rights movement and racism in the feminist movement, thereby making a space and discourse specifically for women of colour. Today you might hear this type of recognition discussed as intersectionality. The emergence of difference feminism occurred in the 1980s. This facet fought for the right for women to be treated as equal without having to imitate or behave like men. This movement upheld women's difference and contribution as important, unique and vital.

Quotes:

"If women understand by emancipation the adoption of the masculine role then we are lost indeed"
Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

*"A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle."*¹⁰
Irina Dunn

Key Artists

- Vivienne Binns (1967 Watters Gallery exhibition and National Gallery Canberra)
- Ponch Hawkes
- Bonita Ely (Murray River Punch; on motherhood)¹¹
- Sue Ford

THIRD WAVE FEMINISM

1990S TO 2013-14

During this time feminism was redefined again. Third wave feminism is defined by intersectionality, which was fully embraced. This wave recognised that women of different cultural backgrounds, racial backgrounds, nationalities and religions were part of feminism.

Key Priorities

- Respected sex work and pornography as domains in which women could exercise their agency over their bodies to their benefit. This was a contrast to second wave feminism which rejected pornography, prostitution and stripping as sexual violence on the part of men.
- Riot Grrl music began as a forum for women to perform punk on their own terms. Kathleen Hanna and Bikini Kill symbolise this music. Hanna sang, 'I can sell my body for money sometimes' as a declaration of what she could

and would do with her body as being on her own terms (if taken biographically, the lyric was referring to Hanna stripping for money), and no one could tell her otherwise. This was also a response to other Feminists who saw all work within the sex industry as unacceptable engagement with men's sexualised desire for women's bodies.

- Ownership of the body was mirrored through reclamation of words used as derogatory against women (slut, bitch, c&*t, whore, etc.). By embracing, rather than trying to repress, these feminists stripped such terms of their power.
- Queer theory, which emerged from feminist theory, was important as a means of discussing personal, bodily and identity diversity and difference. The idea of queer as being separate from the patriarchal models of gender idealisation is aligned with feminist differentiation from men – women and queer people recognised as, and for, their difference, and given equal treatment.
- Strong focus on the individual and personal narratives. Issues such as equal pay and the fight against Rape Culture were still paramount.
- Raunch culture, lipstick feminism, sex positive feminism: Third Wave Feminists saw any restriction of women's self-expression, from men or more conservative feminists, as unacceptable. Like they reclaimed derogatory terms, they also reclaimed what might be thought of as overtly sexualised 'looks'. This meant that what might be reproached as 'slutty' was an option for women – a full spectrum of dressing and presentation was allowed. The kinder whore look was also big at the time, championed by Courtney Love of Hole and Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland. This can be thought of as a reclamation of the process of objectification of women – owning it and taking control/power away from men.

Quotes

*"[t]he confusion surrounding what constitutes third-wave feminism is in some respects its defining feature."*¹²

*"[F]or anyone born after the early 1960's, the presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted. For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it – it's simply in the water."*¹³

Key Artists

- Rita Ackerman
- Kim Gordon
- Cindy Sherman
- Julie Rrap
- Lyndal Walker

FOURTH WAVE FEMINISM 2011-13 TO PRESENT

This wave is marked by a resurgence of interest in feminism. This is primarily because it is recognised that many of the things that previous waves fought against are still happening. The 'wave' status of this period is actually still up for debate. Many do not recognise this period as having as clearly defined points of difference as previous waves. This may be due to the fact that digital technology means that many voices are speaking singly, and so have many individual faces, rather than one agreed identity. Previous movements had to organise into larger, more visible, cohesive groups to be heard.

Key Priorities

- Defined by the use of technology and digitally driven. The ease with which the internet and social media allows individuals to 'call out' abuses and injustices allows significant campaigns to develop with speed.
- This movement focuses on everyday feminism and recognises that whilst much of the obvious, violent sexist behaviour is not happening anymore, much of those behaviours are still present in more covert guises relating to workplace and social abuses.
- Centres queering of gender and sexuality binaries.
- Inclusive of trans people. Previous waves of feminists, specifically TERFs (Trans-exclusionary radical feminists), disregard trans women as not truly female.
- Body positive – celebrates bodies that do not conform to stereotypes of beauty.
- Is anti-misandrist. This means that masculine gender roles are not seen as simply harmful to feminine gender roles, but also to the people who have to inhabit them (typically men).¹⁴
- Many 'leaders' in their teens or early twenties because of the digital platforms in use and lack of 'gatekeepers' that come with more traditional platforms.

Criticisms

- The reliance on technology means that this wave of feminism is potentially privileging those who can afford digital devices. This is a contrast to the decidedly lo-tech strategies of third wave feminism which embraced punk, analogue means such as accessible formats as photocopying, VHS and audio tapes.
- Because people participate online in commenting or 'liking' something this may mean that they never actually attend rallies or meetings, thereby curtailing more meaningful, effective impact.

Quotes

"Personally, I believe that the Fourth Wave exists because it says that it exists. I believe the Fourth Wave matters, because I remember how sure I was that my generation mattered."¹⁵
Jennifer Baumgardner

Key Artists

- Amalia Ulman
- Ryan Trecartin
- Spence Messih
- Archie Barry
- Giselle Stanborough
- Vincent Silk

- 1 'Timeline of Womens Suffrage Granted, by Country', The Nellie McClung Foundation. <http://www.ournellie.com/timeline-womens-suffrage-granted-country/>
- 2 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/feminism>
- 3 Willemsen, Tineke M. 1997. "Feminism and Utopias: An Introduction". In *Feminist Utopias: In a Postmodern Era*, Alkeline van Lenning, Marrie Bekker, & Ine Vanwesenbeeck, eds., p.5. Tilberg, Netherlands: Tilburg University Press.
- 4 NOW (National Organisation for Women). 1970. "NOW (National Organization for Women) Bill of Rights". In *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings From the Women's Liberation Movement*, Robin Morgan, ed., pp. 512-513. New York: Random House. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sisterhood_Is_Powerful
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- 10 'The meaning and origin of the expression: A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle', The Phrase Finder. <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/414150.html>
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- 13 Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards. 2000. *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. p.77. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- 14 Sollee, Kristen, "6 Things to Know About 4th Wave Feminism," *Bustle* (blog), 31 October, 2015, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/119524-6-things-to-know-about-4th-wave-feminism>
- 15 Article written by the author about Fourth Wave Feminism. Jennifer Baumgardner, Is There A Fourth Wave? Does it Matter?. From Baumgardner, Jennifer. 2011. *Fem!: Goo Goo, Gaga and Some Thoughts on Balls*. Berkeley, California: Seal Press. Available at: <http://www.feminist.com/resources/artspeech/genwom/baumgardner2011.html>

Images

- a. Lady Butler, *Scotland Forever!* 1881
- b. Kelly Doley, *Things learnt about feminism #1-95* 2014 (detail). Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, University of Western Australia.
- c. Feminist activists of the Women Against Pornography (WAP) group in a protest 'March On Times Square', in New York, 20th October 1979. Photograph: Barbara Alper / Getty Images
- d. Kim Gordon, *Sonic Youth - Kool Thing* 1990 (video still).
- e. Archie Barry, *Hypnic* 2017 (detail). Courtesy the artist. Photograph: Vanessa Gordon
- f. Giselle Stanborough, *Giselle dates* 2016-17. Courtesy the artist

Acknowledgements

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**Second
Wave
W
FEMINISM
IT'S A
WHITE MIDDLECLASS
THING!**

b.



c.



d.



e.



f.