

How *Can* Men be Feminists?

How Men *Can* be Feminists

Key Idea

How can men be feminists, and support feminism? This is a complicated question because for each different type of feminism, there is different 'correct' answer. So, the answer will differ depending on the particular feminism practiced by the person to whom the question is being addressed.

- *Essentialist* Feminists believe that there are innate, essential differences between men and women from birth, and that therefore men can never be feminists. This position also negatively impacts trans people, as their gender statuses are taken to be 'less valid' than those born female.¹
- *Separatist* Feminists believe that feminism is for women only, and it is impossible for men to positively contribute to feminism because even well intentioned men cannot avoid enacting the dynamics of patriarchy, and therefore cannot be feminists.²
- *Liberal* Feminists practice a more open feminism. It sees a place for men as equals, who can operate as allies to women, and are mindful not to favour men over women based on reasons of gender discrimination.

"Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." - bell hooks

The above quote defines feminism as having a set of essential goals, as American author and social activist bell hooks understands them. Significantly, there is no mention of any gender.³ This opens up possibilities for both benefits and responsibilities of such work to achieve these goals as being shared by female, male and non-binary individuals equally across society. According to this model men, indeed anyone, can be a feminist.

Can men make feminist art? Here are three key perspectives on the definition of feminist art that each suggest different answers to this question.

- Feminist art *must be made by women*. Art made by others cannot be considered feminist. This is an essentialist view and primarily associated with earlier generations of feminists.
- Feminist art must be *made with feminist intentions*. That is, to create an artwork that makes a point for feminism.
- There are *no feminist artworks* – *only feminist readings* of artworks. This position states that the work of feminist understanding happens entirely in the mind of the viewer, regardless of the gender of the artist or their intentions.

In an art context, being a male feminist might translate as helping and supporting female, trans, genderqueer, non-gender binary or other non-male identifying individuals to realise artworks for which they need assistance, support or participation. Or it might entail working to ensure representation of artists of all gender identifications in the programming of gallery, performance and festival programs.

Exhibition Case Studies

Nat Thomas, *Man cleaning up*, performance and text 2017

One way that a male can actively be a feminist within an art context is to participate in an artwork which requires a man in order to be fully realised. An example of this is Nat Thomas' *Man cleaning up*, an new commission in *Unfinished Business*. This artwork cannot happen without male participation, as it requires a man to take on an unpaid participatory role of scrubbing the gallery floor for half an hour whilst wearing a high visibility green vest with 'MAN CLEANING UP' written on the back. Volunteers must identify themselves in relation to several questions that the artist has posed, including: "Are you a white man born to a privilege you didn't ask for? Are you a man feminist wanting to work toward gender equality but don't know where to start? Do you want to confront cultural norms and help clean up the mess that is gender discrimination?"

The job of cleaning the floor with a scrubbing brush is a cliché of housework (think Cinderella) that has been made largely redundant by modern technologies. However, it is powerfully symbolic because it is hard on the body and difficult to undertake whilst maintaining personal dignity. The artwork is humorous, but engages the serious issue of women's labour, frequently unseen domestic work, being undervalued. Taking on this role involves a man volunteering to become the butt of a joke and perhaps be physically uncomfortable and vulnerable for half an hour. This is not a huge sacrifice, but is still a significant gesture of support for both the artist and the conceptual content of the artwork. One of the main points behind Thomas' work is that the practicing of *feminism is a workload in itself* – unpaid labour for the most part borne by women. Through a callout on social media platforms, Thomas asks volunteer men to share the workload by performing a symbolic gesture which draws attention to real issues.

Ann Newmarch, *Women hold up half the sky* 1978

Ann Newmarch's artwork *Women hold up half the sky* was made as a tribute to the achievements her Aunt Peggy, who built her own home single-handedly whilst also working two jobs and raising eight children. The piece celebrates her aunt's independence and incredible capacity for hard work. Aunt Peggy's dual engagements, with both building (an activity traditionally considered masculine), and raising a large family (a role traditionally considered feminine), qualifies her as an embodiment of aspirations typically associated with feminism – that women can do whatever they put their minds to, regardless of societal expectations of gender roles. In the image Aunt Peggy is holding up a man – perhaps a friend or family member – in her arms above the text 'Women hold up half the sky'. This quote, originally spoken by Chinese Communist leader Mao Zedong, substitutes the sky as a metaphor for society. This relates to the traditional expression 'The sky is falling in', which is a metaphor for chaos and disarray of society. In this way, the quote asserts that women are responsible for upholding just as much of society as men. The artwork adopts the form of a screen printed poster, which is a format traditionally associated with advertising, promotion and political propaganda. Considering these historical associations, Newmarch's choice of media can be interpreted as employing the visual language of promotional materials to celebrate her aunt as a feminist icon.

Historical Touchpoints

- Victor Burgin, *Office at Night* 1986
- Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin* 1987
- Paul Yore, *Protest Or Die* 2017

Questions

- If you made a drawing to show one way that men and boys can be feminists, or help feminism as a cause, what would that drawing be of?
- List three examples each of times when you have seen men from your life behaving in ways that, firstly, you think support feminism, and secondly, do not support feminism. These might relate to sharing work equally with women, giving opportunities to women, reversing gender 'roles' or interacting with women in respectful ways. Are most of the men you know feminists, or not? Share experiences.
- This information demonstrates the range of equally valid, yet contrasting, opinions around whether men can be feminists or not. What do you think? Have a round table discussion with your peers where each person begins by briefly stating their own opinion – be prepared to (respectfully) disagree!

- 1 'Essentialism', Geek Feminism Wiki. <http://geekfeminism.wikia.com/wiki/Essentialism>
- 2 Hoagland, Sarah Lucia. 1989. *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value*. Palo Alto, California: Institute of Lesbian Studies.
- 3 bell hooks doesn't capitalise the pseudonym that she writes under. This is an effort to place emphasis on what she writes and her ideas, rather than her name and identity.
- 4 The Advertiser: Poster tribute – New honour for women: Article on Ann Newmarch's artwork. <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/poster-tribute-new-honour-for-women/news-story/fbab59d0bf37cac6a45a0c2d8f1df0b5>

Images

- a. Natalie Thomas, *Man cleaning up* 2017. Greens MP Adam Bandt cleaning the floor of ACCA on the opening night of *Unfinished Business*. Photograph: Chris Hopkins
- b. Ann Newmarch, *Women hold up half the sky* 1978. Courtesy the Cruthers Collection of Women's Art, University of Western Australia
- c. Victor Burgin, *Office at Night* 1986 (detail). Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal © Victor Burgin
- d. Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid (on wall) with The Wages of Sin* 1987. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Acknowledgements

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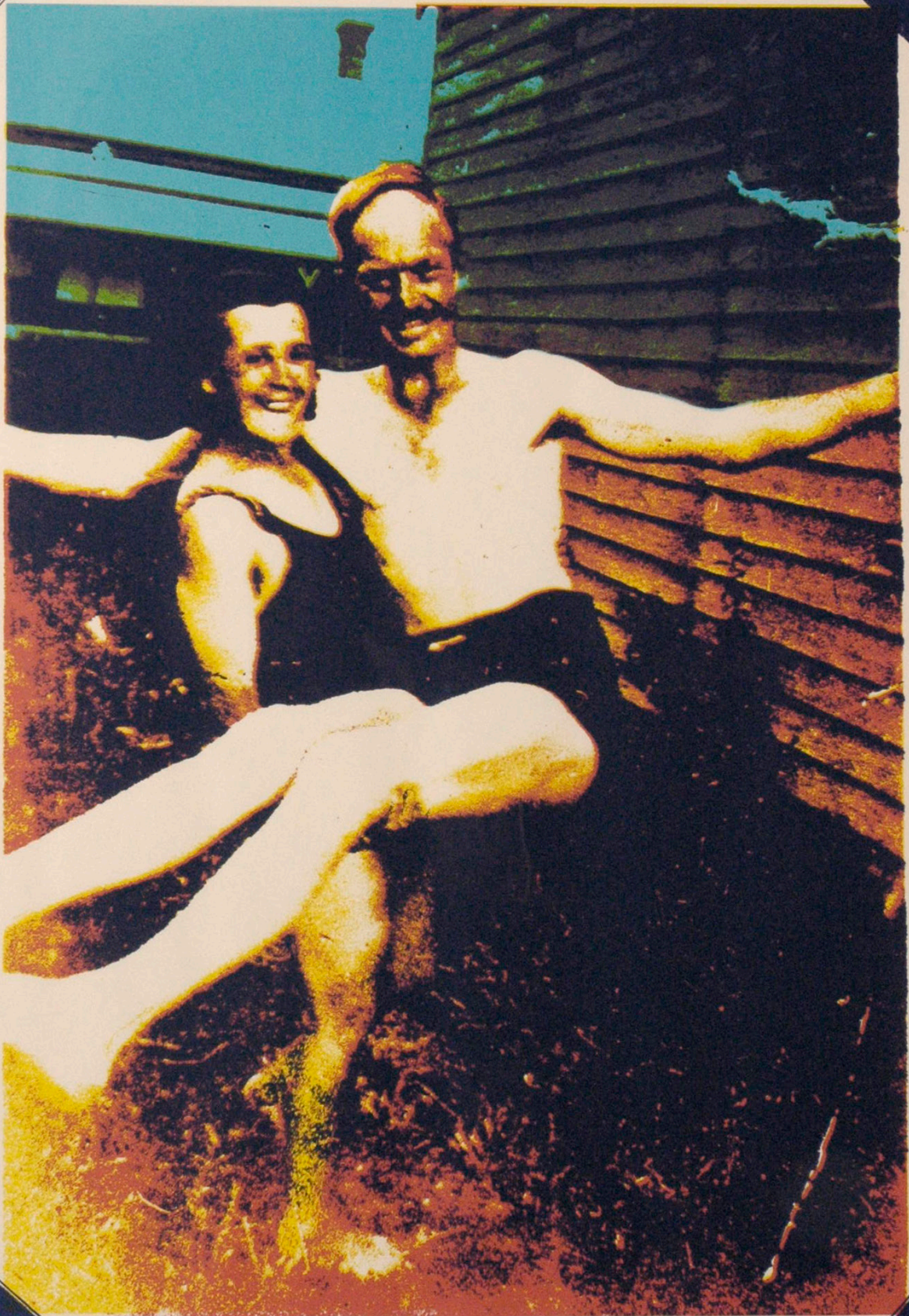
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a.



a.



1940 PEGGY, MOTHER OF EIGHT.

Newmark

WOMEN HOLD UP HALF THE SKY!

1965 2/14

Newmark 78



c.



d.