

Julieta Aranda and Kaye Cain-
Nielsen
Editorial

01/04

A strange adaptation of an old joke starts like this: a group of feminists walks into a glass ceiling, and a can of worms pours out ...

So what happens if the glass ceiling breaks? Who picks up the pieces; who do the pieces fall on? Why haven't we been setting our sights above it this whole time?

Previously in *e-flux journal*, we asked:

In ten seconds, how many synonyms can you think of for the word "power"? And then, just when you thought that you finally got the hang of how the power structures around you function, they seem to be coming undone ...

What is feminism, precisely? What are feminisms today?¹

To examine these questions and myriad others, the previous and present issues of *e-flux journal* have been dedicated to feminism(s). It has been a particular pleasure to embark on an exploration and an unfolding of the many complex realities and iterations that feminisms can accommodate. Not one feminism, but many.

This season, feminisms continues. In this issue, nine authors locate various theories, practices, principles, limits, lineages, and outgrowths of feminisms, in geographies as immediate as the human lap – a space explored in this issue by Filipa Ramos – and as distant as the diplomatically double penetrated *Soyuz-Apollo* docking system in outer space, whose trajectory Natalya Serkova writes here. Histories of feminist movements are traced back – for example, to the Marxist feminist Alexandra Kollontai, whose work Maria Lind navigates – and projected forward, as in the enclosed science fiction story by Nisi Shawl, which depicts an alternate timeline in which members of a revolutionary social movement motivated by feminist principles send encoded messages to one another by drone. Via Denise Ferreira da Silva, a black feminist poethics takes shape. Marwa Arsanios relays ecofeminist practices taught in refugee camps, passed down from one generation to the next. McKenzie Wark speaks around and through the many, and many-gendered, voices of Kathy Acker. Doreen Mende tracks the archival metabolism of the undutiful daughter. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez proposes intersectional antidotes to art institutions drenched in shades of white.

Before we delve deeper into the social structures that perpetuate gender inequalities, it is worth taking a step back to think about how gender parameters have been established: Who gets to define what womanhood is? Who gets to

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write the script of how gender should be performed and to delimit the borders between one gender and another? And more importantly, who gets to blur said borders, and point out how leaky and gray-zoned these concepts tend to be, regardless of any insistence to the contrary? How can we make sure that the tasks of describing, living, and representing gender subjectivities are evenly distributed?

When the distribution of gender subjectivities is not even, we quickly run into problems. Those who manage to excel against the odds become exceptional. Being exceptional sounds much better than it actually is. When you are an exception, nothing that you do has any bearing on the rest of the group that you belong to – because you are in a league of your own, right? Tempting as it may be to be singled out for one's accomplishments, the price one pays for it is high. If you are an exception, then you are not the norm. You are abnormal. And being denied normalcy is actually a rather uncomfortable way to navigate life, when one actually wants to do normal things, in addition to having a successful career. Thinking about how the label of exceptionalism is applied also makes one think that defining someone's path as an exception is a quick and easy way to make sure their accomplishments are not easily replicable, and that they don't get absorbed into the culture.

Now, let's go back to the question of power, and let's explore the possibility of defining power by its absence/negation. Withholding your power (such as it is) as a woman could prove to be a valuable exercise in accessing the power structures around you – be it as a clinical exercise in understanding how you connect to them and how they affect or intoxicate you; or to show others what happens in your absence, to make visible your invisibility as a connective tissue of sorts, to demonstrate your value by its absence; or to teach yourself how you too feed the current power structures.

Last year women went on strike in around thirty countries. Some of the guidelines for participation were loose, signaling that this was not your conventional workers' strike. On Womensmarch.com, instructions were as follows:

- 1) Women take the day off, from paid and unpaid labor
- 2) Avoid shopping for one day (with exceptions for small, women-, and minority-owned businesses)
- 3) Wear RED in solidarity with A Day Without a Woman

In this continuing post-Fordist moment, where is all our paid and unpaid labor located: at work, at

home, or everywhere? On the pervasiveness of affective labor, Silvia Federici warns: "The generalization of affective labor, i.e., its dispersal over every form of work, takes us back to a pre-feminist situation, where not only the specificity but the very existence of women's reproductive work and the struggle women are making on this terrain become invisible again."²

How to strike as feminists? Do you sabotage your commute, refuse to feed your child, boycott the family vacation with the kids? Do you write a considerate out-of-office reply and attach a friendly GIF? Do you perform an exorcism, found a coven? Where do I go to work at being a woman and where do I exit the factory, the Lumière Brothers-style outpour at the end of the day? Kathi Weeks asks, "How might feminism contest the marginalization and underestimation of unwaged forms of reproductive labor, without trading on the work ethic's mythologies of work?"³

Should resistance be armed or should it be peaceful? Imagine waking up tomorrow and all the guns in the US are in the hands of women. How would that day end? How many women would be killed at the hands of other women?

Barring this extreme, does striking as a woman entail refusing to smile, or to provide sex or acts of caretaking, maternal or otherwise? Is it a disruption to the pulse of emotional labor, as many second-wave feminists argued? Or, in the complete opposite direction, does striking as a woman involve the embrace, against the grain, of a smirk, a jab, a scream, a frown, an act of radical self-care, of sex, of surrogacy? Does striking consist precisely in caring for others? Perhaps resistance is to be found in the act of making kin where there is none to be found; in embracing excess, and refusing to let others police just how much is too much; in refusing to naturalize both nature and nurture, and deciding to fuck them up, ecosexual-style. While you're at it, can you kindly let us know where you fall on the spectrum between florasexual and faunasexual?

As you're probably aware, this was not the first women's strike. In Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, Athenian women withhold sex from their husbands to protest against the Peloponnesian War that men are waging. In 1895, Susan B. Anthony said, "The women of Kansas should sit by and fold their hands. If they would stop their helping the men for six months, we would have equal suffrage granted us." In 1970 there was a women's strike in the US called "Women's Strike for Equality." In 1975 there was also a women's strike in Iceland, but they decided to refer to it as "Women's Day Off" rather than a "strike." The wisdom of this decision is attested to by the fact that 90

percent of Icelandic women stopped performing their usual labor for the day. Icelandic men are known to have nicknamed it “The Long Friday.”

Many other forms of refusal have been practiced by women in history everywhere. Consider, for example, the Igbo practice of “sitting on” – gathering to publicly shame, through singing and dance, a man who has committed an injustice but who enjoys impunity under the rule of written law. In the early 1900s, women in British Nigeria also used this practice to protest against figureheads of colonial rule. It is significant that feminists started identifying reproductive labor as such – as *labor* – around the same time that deindustrialization, off-shoring, and pink-collaring were changing labor conditions. Perhaps the decision in Iceland to refer to the women’s strike by the more appealing label “Women’s Day Off,” like last year’s “A Day Without a Woman,” speaks to the changing nature of work itself. In Iceland: a gendered version of not-working, of a holiday, because leisure – not nonwork – is the opposite of work. Last year: an apocalyptic extraction, so that a world without women renders itself visible. So you see, many of us, and others before us, bargained decades ago for a party, and all we got was ladies night. Free love! But it got watered down to free beer and a ton of unstructured family ties. Turns out you are relieved from the baby in your lap, only to have a laptop sit there instead. You took the pill but almost overdosed on estrogen in a medical trial led by men.

When the labor of womanhood is under permanent discussion, where exactly does your labor stop? Because it just so happens that, as a feminist, you also have the task of understanding how power functions around you. Possible answers might read like a *Cosmopolitan* quiz:

YOU SEE POWER AS:

- a) A one-way vector
- b) A two-way vector
- c) A contaminated site that slowly burns through your skin
- d) An intoxication that turns you genderless as soon as you reach the pinnacle of your profession and obtain the power associated with it
- e) A strange force that coerces, but from which you can also steal, in order to perform it
- f) None of the above
- g) All of the above

And here are a series of questions to help you understand what type of power you are:

Do you take your power to a BDSM party?
Do you imagine yourself as being inside a complex *Game of Thrones* plot, in which your secret weapon is called Stockholm Syndrome?

Do you burn bras, or demand that bras be better designed?

Do you take down femininity, or do you play with lipstick?

There is also the open question of what constitutes “feminine” or “female” power. What might a matriarchy look like? One fleshed-out history comes from the Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Marmon Silko:

In the old days, strong, sturdy women were most admired. One of my most vivid preschool memories is of the crew of Laguna women, in their forties and fifties, who came to cover our house with adobe plaster. They handled the ladders with great ease, and while two women ground the adobe mud on stones and added straw, another woman loaded the hod with mud and passed it up to the two women on ladders, who were smoothing the plaster on the wall with their hands. Since women owned the houses, they did the plastering. At Laguna, men did the basket making and the weaving of fine textiles; men helped a great deal with the child care too. Because the Creator is female, there is no stigma on being female; gender is not used to control behavior. No job was a man’s job or a woman’s job; the most able person did the work ...

Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, a man could dress as a woman and work with the women and even marry a man without any fanfare. Likewise, a woman was free to dress like a man,

to hunt and go to war with the men, and to marry a woman. In the old Pueblo worldview, we are all a mixture of male and female, and this sexual identity is changing constantly.⁴

There is much yet in terms of pasts and futures to discuss in our present. Two issues deep and our work here at *e-flux journal* is just getting started. Feminisms contains multitudes, and the writing of multitudes does not fit within two editions of a contemporary art journal. A large part of the editorial impulse here is to keep the momentum going. Already, several texts commissioned under this theme will appear not in these pages but rather in the pages of issues to come. We will be paying close attention to the multiple channels of feminist frequencies from here on out. Stay tuned ...

x

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Julietta Aranda and Kaye Cain-Nielsen, "Editorial," *e-flux journal* 92 (June 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/92/206017/editorial/>.

2

Silvia Federici, "On Affective Labour," in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, eds. Michael A. Peters and Ergin Bulut (Peter Lang, 2011).

3

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2011), 13.

4

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (Simon and Schuster, 2013), 66.