Art Activism in the American Feminist Movement

Art has always been used to communicate ideas whose impact and message transcend the limitations of the written word. Art activism takes the innate power of art to affect people’s opinions and uses it to advance a specific political or social goal. In the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, the feminist movement in the United States has used art activism to promote the cause of women’s advancement. Starting from humble beginnings, feminist art activism has dramatically increased in recent years. However, the oversaturation of corporate interests into modern feminism may have eroded the impact art activism has on the viewer, and ultimately detracted from the movement’s ability to create change.

It is difficult to pinpoint the start of the use of art activism since many variations of protest art can be found throughout history. In the 20th century, art activism was majorly influenced by Dadaism, an art movement that used satire and irrationality to critique World War I. War was often used by artists as a metaphor for the general use of power and authority. Other motivating influences for art activism in the 20th century were the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s, and the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s (Martinique). What makes art activism a unique form of protest is its departure from the norms of the art world and traditional protest alike. Activist art is frequently disparaged by art critics as having less artistic worth than non-activist art, and some critics discount activist works entirely from having any artistic merit. But while art activism may not meet the art world’s restrictive
standards that limit non-activist art, these works can be highly effective in touching the aesthetic consciousness of the audience, jolting the viewer into questioning problems in the world (Eyerman). Art activism’s true power is subversive, upturning commonly held notions about power and society in a sensory way. Activist artists make others see, hear, or feel ideas in a fresh light and a palatable format (Lippard). Art activists do not merely criticize the art system or the general social and political world, but seek to change conditions by means of art. Essentially, art activists want be useful to activist movements, but simultaneously do not wish to cease being artists (Groys). Art activism has multiple goals and impacts. The main purpose of art activism is, obviously, to advance an activist agenda. Art expresses the aims and motivations of activist artists and creates alternate visions of society which can serve as a rallying point in protest movements (Adams). However, artists and works also have the secondary benefit of uniting disadvantaged communities. In the words of art critic and philosopher Boris Groys:

Art activists try to change living conditions in economically underdeveloped areas, raise ecological concerns, offer access to culture and education for the populations of poor countries and regions, attract attention to the plight of illegal immigrants, improve the conditions of people working in art institutions, and so forth. In other words, art activists react to the increasing collapse of the modern social state and try to replace the social state and the NGOs that for different reasons cannot or will not fulfill their role.

Artistic expression can produce knowledge and solidarity within groups of protestors, and be a means of communications to outsiders on what the protest is about (Eyerman). Art activism is a powerful tool of protest because it can illustrate the meaning of the cause to those not affected by the issue in question. By encouraging and amplifying artistic
contributions to activist movements, protesters can draw people in to a dialogue about their movement and pursue paths of change previously closed.

Art activism comes in many forms, ranging from traditional studio art, such as painting or sculpture, to alternative media, including public performance and graffiti. Activist works frequently combine many different media into a single project, and sometimes include the process of art creation, such as teaching, publishing, broadcasting, or organizing within a community (Lippard). There are too many examples of art activism to name, but some of the most important art activists of the 20th and 21st centuries are Picasso, Pussy Riot, and Ai Weiwei. Picasso set the gold standard for fine art activism. The 1937 painting Guernica is arguably Picasso’s most famous work, and certainly his most political. It was created in response to the bombing of the Basque town of Guernica during the Spanish Civil War. Guernica shows the horrors of war and the suffering it causes people (“Guernica, 1937 by Pablo Picasso”). Not only a highly acclaimed artistic masterwork, Guernica was also successful in activism, drawing international attention to the Spanish Civil War and highlighting the cost to innocent civilians (Martinique).
Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist punk rock group, is one of the most prominent performance art groups of all time. They have staged a number of unauthorized and highly provocative guerilla performances in various public places. These demonstrations have a variety of political themes, including feminism, LGBT rights, freedom of speech, and democracy, and are in opposition to Russian leader Vladimir Putin (Martinique). In 2012, three members of Pussy Riot were imprisoned and sentenced to two years in jail after performing in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior directed at the Orthodox Church’s support for Putin (Smith-Spark). Their activism through performance art is an example of how authoritarian states can spawn highly provocative artworks.
Ai Weiwei is a contemporary and highly prolific art activist. Ai touches on multiple political subjects in his pieces, but is most famous for his sharp critiques of the Chinese government’s corruption and human rights abuses. *The Study of Perspective* is a series of photographs taken at monuments around the world, with Ai making an obscene gesture on-camera (Martinique). A more recent work shows scenes from Ai’s illegal detention by the Chinese government in 2011, where he was held for 81 days in a secret prison. These six fiberglass dioramas depict his daily existence at the hands of the Chinese paramilitary guards (Wong).
Examples of art activism can be found everywhere. Countless movements have used artworks to promote their agendas, with varying degrees of success. The modern American feminist movement is a notable example of a movement with a rich and successful history of impactful activist artworks, starting in the 19th century and continuing today. To truly understand the impact art activism has had on the feminist movement, the history of American feminism must be considered.

The modern feminist movement in the United States encompasses a wide variety of issues and sub-movements pertaining to women’s rights. Feminist art activism has served as an artistic representation of that cause and highlights the female experience under gender-based discrimination. Before feminism, female artists were practically invisible to the public eye. The art world was known as a “boy’s club,” and women were frequently denied gallery representation and exhibitions because of their gender. Feminist artists sought to combat this by creating alternate venues for female artists to show their work and promoting the visibility of female artists within the market. Feminism created opportunities and spaces for women artists that previously did not exist, and brought to
light the many hidden contributions women made towards art history (“Feminist Art Movement”). Art historians have debated whether feminist art was a period of art history, a movement, or a total shift in art creation. Some even describe feminist art not as an artistic style but instead a method of creating art (Napikoski). Feminist artists frequently use materials traditionally associated with the female gender, such as textiles and ceramics, or other unconventional media like performance and video, which were not historically male-dominated like painting and sculpture. By using unconventional methods of expression, feminist artists sought to expand the definition of fine art and incorporate a wider variety of perspectives into the art world (“Feminist Art Movement”). Feminist art activism grew greatly from the inception of the movement and has expanded to many forms and artists in modernity.

The first great era of modern American feminism began in the tail end of the 19th century and swept the nation in the first half of the 20th century. Now known as “first wave feminism,” female rights activists at this time focused on securing basic liberties for women, who were legally treated as less than men. Interestingly, this so-called first wave feminism was took a very different view of women than feminism today. Female rights organizers in the early years believed that women had significant biological differences from men, not just the obvious physical traits but intellectual, emotional, and personality differences as well. Women were traditionally viewed as homemakers and childrearers, and while, to a certain extent, feminist leaders did not reject this antiquated notion, they strongly argued that women had the same potential for talents and skills as men (Dixit). The first organized gathering of feminist leaders took place in 1848. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Coffin Mott, and other like-minded women called for “a convention to
discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women” (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). The Seneca Falls Convention attracted widespread attention and many prominent activists of the time were in attendance, including abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass. The Declaration of Independence was used as a template for a new document called the Declaration of Sentiments, calling for increased rights and protections for women, most notably female suffrage. Originally a controversial and risky proposition, suffrage moved to the forefront of the women’s rights movement since the vote would provide the means to achieve other goals. Women’s suffrage organizations spread all over the country in networks of local women’s clubs (Dixit). Activists including Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Sojourner Truth traveled the country for the next forty years, giving lectures and organizing for women’s rights (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). In 1920, the 19th Amendment was signed into law, granting American women the right to vote (“Women of Protest”). In just a few decades, these activists advanced the cause of women farther than in the last hundred years. Now women could vote and take charge of their lives independent of their husbands or fathers. This was huge, not only for women at the time but also for their descendants. The bold work these suffragettes did laid the groundwork for all feminist activism and artwork yet to come.

Feminist art as it is known today did not exist in these early years because art activism had not yet entered the collective protest lexicon of the time. More traditional forms of protest, such as marches, frequently featured visual aids such as protest posters or signs. These signs were very simple – designed solely to be an extension of the written word essays penned by feminist leaders and the chants repeated at feminist demonstrations.
Though the signs themselves were not intended as art, feminist protest signs today are frequently the vehicle for snappy, easily reproduced art activism. These basic signs helped set a foundation for more sophisticated feminist posters and the use of art in protests later. Female demonstrators also engaged in performances during protests to further spread the message. In 1919, to promote the passage of the women’s suffrage amendment, demonstrators would gather copies of President Wilson’s speeches on democracy and burn them in urns outside public buildings, including the White House. These “Watchfires of Freedom” performances often resulted in arrests and counter protests for the female activists (“Women of Protest”).

Figure 4: Suffragettes picketing in 1917

Taken from https://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/connections/women-protest/history4.html
That same year, women who had served sentences for demonstrating wore their prison uniforms and made speeches across the country in favor of the suffrage amendment (“Women of Protest”). Called the “Prison Special,” this tactical use of special costumes is similar to feminist performance artists today, who don the garb of ‘handmaids’ from the feminist book-turned-television series “The Handmaid’s Tale” to protest infringement of female reproductive rights (Hauser).
While the popular conception of feminist art was not prevalent in the earliest years of the movement, American suffragettes planted the seeds for feminist art groundswell that took place in the late 20th century.

In the 1960s, the second wave of feminist activism swept over the United States. Delayed by the World War II war effort, women’s rights activists came back in force during this period. Several rapid-fire developments greatly increased feminism’s presence in the public eye. In 1963, Betty Friedan published a landmark feminist book, *The Feminine Mystique*. It became an instant bestseller, and inspired thousands of women to look beyond the role of homemaker and pursue self-empowerment. In 1964, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act passed. It included the category “sex” as a prohibited basis for employment discrimination, along with race, religion, and national origin. With its passage, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was established to investigate discrimination complaints (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). In 1969, the New York based group Women Artists in Revolution (WAR) split off from the Art Workers’ Coalition (AWC) to protest the AWC’s male-dominated group character and because the AWC did
not protest on behalf of female artists. WAR provided a greater platform for female art activists to spread their work. In 1971, the New York Women in the Arts organized a protest against gallery owners for not exhibiting women’s art, and female artists picketed the Corcoran Biennial in Washington D.C. for excluding female artists (Napikowski). These artistic and political developments coincided with feminism’s biggest and most important fight of the era. Back in the first wave of female empowerment, suffragette Alice Paul drafted the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), which would have enshrined men and women as legal equals in the United States Constitution. The wording was simple: “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex” (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). In 1972, the ERA was finally passed in Congress after a fifty year gap. From there, it went to the states to be ratified. The campaign for ratification of the ERA involved millions of women in their community women’s rights groups. Female organizers lobbied local and federal politicians to support the passage of this landmark amendment (Napikowski). However, opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment, most notably conservative anti-feminist Phyllis Schlafly, thought the amendment degraded traditional values and promoted government control over personal lives. When the deadline for ratification came in 1982, the ERA fell a mere three states short of the necessary majority (Eisenberg and Ruthsdotter). Despite evidence that the general population supported the ERA, many politicians believed voting for the measure to be too controversial.

Second-wave feminists created some of the most famous and influential feminist art activism of all time. It was during this period that new forms of media, in place of traditional painting, drawing, or sculpture, were strongly embraced by the artistic
community. Judy Chicago was an art activist who epitomized this era. She was also known for being a feminist educator and art critic, and created several notable installations including *The Birth Project* and *The Holocaust Project: From Darkness into Light* (Lewis). In 1971, Chicago established the Feminist Art program at California State University, Fresno. In 1972, she began working at the California Institute of the Arts, which also had a Feminist Art program (Napikoski). There, she worked on *Womanhouse* with Miriam Shapiro. This project was an art installation that originated as a fixer-upper house, but was soon transformed. *Womanhouse* combined the efforts of female artists who learned traditionally male skills to renovate the house, then used traditionally female skills to add feminist decorations (Lewis).

![Womanhouse](http://www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art-artworks.htm)

**Figure 7: Womanhouse by Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro**

Judy Chicago’s most famous feminist installation was *The Dinner Party*, which took from 1974 to 1979 to complete. *The Dinner Party* was a triangular dinner table with
thirty nine place settings, each of which represented a famous female figure from history and mythology (Lewish). The table settings had gold ceramic chalices and porcelain plates painted with butterfly and vulva-inspired designs representing the vagina and Mother Nature (“Important Art and Artists”). Another nine hundred and ninety nine women have their names on written on porcelain floor tiles around the table. Chicago used ceramics, embroidery, quilting, and weaving, which were media often identified with women and treated as less than fine art.

Figure 8: The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago

Taken from http://www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art-artworks.htm

The Dinner Party was first exhibited in 1979. It was then toured around the country and seen by some fifteen million people (Lewis). The Dinner Party is among the most well-known feminist art activist works in existence and is now permanently installed in the Brooklyn Museum’s Center for Feminist Art. (“Important Art and Artists”). Through this piece, Judy Chicago participated in the feminist art history effort of the 1970s, where
artists rediscovered lost role models for female artists and included them in history books that previously only included men. By using intricately wrought textiles, porcelain, and tiles, Chicago reclaimed the status of “high art” to apply to lower status “women’s work” media (“Important Art and Artists”). Of her own work, Chicago said:

Because we are denied knowledge of our history, we are deprived of standing upon each others’ shoulders and building upon each others hard earned accomplishments. Instead we are condemned to repeat what others have done before us and thus we continually reinvent the wheel. The goal of The Dinner Party is to break this cycle (Lewis).

Another second-wave feminist mainstay was the Guerrilla Girls, a shifting collective of female artists committed to exposing sexism, racism, and other forms of inequality in the art world. Over the years, the group has numbered around sixty members, all of whom wore gorilla masks as an avant-garde play on the words ‘guerrilla’ and ‘gorilla.’ Members assume the names of famous female artists from history, such as Frida Kahlo, Lee Krasner, and Kathe Kollwitz. The masks and fake names protected the women and their artistic careers from reprisals, as the group has been highly controversial since its creation. The Guerrilla Girls originally formed in 1985 to point out a huge discrepancy in the numbers of male and female artists shown by major museums and galleries (Brockes). The Guerrilla Girls made numerous posters, stickers, and slogans using tongue-in-cheek humor to break down prejudice within the artistic community (“Important Art and Artists”). One of the Guerrilla Girls’ earliest posters, The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist exemplified this philosophy in 1989.
Their most famous poster, also from 1989, points out that while only five percent of artists in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York were female, eighty-five percent of the nudes were women.
Over time, the stickers, posters, and other creations by the Guerrilla Girls have become desirable artworks in their own rights. The Guerrilla Girls are still in operation today, continuing to fight for equal rights and eroding biases against female artists.

The late 20th century saw the birth of third great wave of feminism, born in response to perceived failures of past feminist efforts and enduring frustration with the status of women in society. Third wave feminism is often credited as beginning with Riot Grrrl, a number of feminist punk bands that emerged in the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s. Riot Grrrl bands spread their feminist ideology through performances and pamphlets, called “fanzines,” and provided spaces for women to discuss gender, race, sexuality, and equality in an artistic setting. Riot Grrrls rejected perceived ideas of how women were meant to look or behave in pursuit of individuality and activism. Many women and groups were associated with this movement, including Bratmobile, the Olympia trio credited with coining the term “riot grrrl” in their fanzine, Bikini Kill, Sleater-Kinney, and Le Tigre (Hutchinson).

Figure 11: Members of Riot Grrl band Sleater-Kinney in 1996

Taken from https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/jan/28/riot-grrrl-10-of-the-best
The Riot Grrl collective and similar activists believed in the cause of female equality but did not identify with the political identity of second wave feminists, who were commonly equated with misandry, bra-burning, and anti-sex policies (Bianco). Previous feminist waves strongly prioritized the concerns of white, well-educated, and upper class women, but third wave feminists rejected this elitism and endeavored for inclusion of other identities. For the first time, intersectional feminism became a priority, a feminist theory designed around being inclusive. The new feminist icons were women of all ages, races, sexual orientations, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds (Rand). Intersectional feminists sought to be nonjudgmental towards women, regardless of background and life choices (Snyder).

Modern feminist topics, intersectional or otherwise, are still hot-button issues in the 21st century. But some argue that women’s advancement being the trendy cause-du-jour may not be helping the cause. The popularity of the feminist movement in recent years has led to many people and groups attempting to claim the label of ‘feminist’ to use to their own advantage. This is seen prominently in the art world, especially in fashion, music, and video. The use of feminism as a sales tactic is not a new phenomenon – advertising has a long history of commodifying social movements to increase brand loyalty and visibility. However, this co-optation of the feminist movement is especially insidious when considering how important genuine feminist action is still needed in society. As said by feminist writer and organizer Andi Zeisler,

It’s this very weird parallel world where on the one hand feminism is now considered very cool — it’s an aesthetic, it’s something that celebrities embrace, it’s something mainstream media uses as a hook to get people interested… But at the same time, feminism itself — the need for feminism and the many ways in which it’s an unfinished
companies — seems increasingly disconnected to that ‘cool feminism.’ (Vagianos)

Companies are eager to cash in on the female empowerment bandwagon but contribute very little of substance to the movement.

Feminist art activism is becoming especially co-opted, thanks to a phenomenon known as “marketplace feminism.” Marketplace feminism promises that feel-good feminism can exist in fundamentally unequal spaces without posing any fundamental threats to them (Bianco). Companies employ tactics such as “empowertising,” which uses the rhetoric of activism to shill unrelated products. One example is a 1998 credit card campaign referencing the one hundred and fifty year anniversary of the Seneca Falls Convention with a tagline reading: “Now you can celebrate the anniversary of this milestone in women’s rights, and the strength and conviction of the courageous suffragettes involved whenever you use your First USA Anniversary Series Platinum Mastercard. Celebrate women’s rights. Apply today” (Lozada). Fashion is the artistic medium of empowertising, given that the industry overwhelmingly markets to a female audience. Though art activists have used fashion and wardrobe in the past (recalling the use of prison costumes as props by first wave suffragettes), the disingenuousness of modern faux-feminist fashion is plain to see. Take, for example, the recent rash of fast-fashion shirts sold featuring feminist slogans. Low-cost retailers such as Forever 21, H&M, and Charlotte Russe feature activism-themed apparel to attract activist-minded customers to their stores, but undercut their stance by mass-producing products in countries where workers (often women) are not provided with safe working conditions or living wages.
When retailers advertise feminist-inspired t-shirts, they have no actual interest in the feminist movement or what it stands for. This creates a massive problem for legitimately feminist fashion activists, who are frequently undercut by price and availability by these massive conglomerates (Sebastian). The appeal of pseudo-feminist apparel is easy to understand – visibility is a necessary and important first step to any civil rights effort (Bianco). But despite how feel-good empowertising tactics are, they are ultimately used to sell products, not uplift women (Vagianos). Though taking advantage of the public’s desire to engage in feminism is good for corporate bottom lines, it is bad for the modern feminist movement. Every dollar spent enriching fake-feminist corporations is a dollar not used to uplift women in society. The co-optation of art activism by companies, both inside and out of the fashion industry, can hinder the visibility and progress feminist art activists trying to make a real impact.
The over-commercialization of feminism is highly ironic – originally an ideology founded on dismantling ingrained power structures, feminism is now being used by financial gain by the very same companies that frequently discriminate against women. While media and pop culture can be excellent conduits to reaching people that social movements could not reach on their own, marketplace feminism allows consumption to stand in for action with resulting change (Nguyen). This is not to say that feminist art in the 21st century has been erased completely: one of the largest feminist art activist demonstrations in history took place in 2017. The day after U.S. President Donald Trump was inaugurated in January, half a million women gathered in the nation’s capital to advocate for gender equality for President Trump’s first full day in office (Garfield and Robinson). The Women’s March was most likely the largest single-day demonstration in United States history, with six hundred and fifty three reported marches across the country supporting the main demonstration in Washington D.C. (Chenoweth and Pressman). A group called the Pussyhat Project helped arrange for women to wear pink knitted hats with cat ears, called “pussy hats,” as a symbol of solidarity for protestors (Garfield and Robinson). The use of the pink hat showed all the hallmarks of a classic feminist art project, including community organizing and using media and colors traditionally associated with women.
Though modern feminism has had successes and failures in activist artwork, the core of the movement remains true to its roots. Women’s advancement is still a top priority for female activists around the country, and art activism is a powerful way for that to spread.

By challenging traditional boundaries and providing a platform for the marginalized to express their views to a wider society, art can be a wielded as powerful tool against injustice, inequality, and oppression. But in the modern feminist movement, art activism is being taken over by corporate interests, and its impact is subsequently diminished. In order for feminist art activism to hold relevance in the future, it must shake its association with unrelated business entities and refocus on the feminist agenda. Only then will feminist art fulfill its potential to make feminism a rallying cry for the next generation of art activists.
Works Cited