

Rose Gibbs speaking at Co-Habiting: Contemporary Art, History & Feminism

I thought I would begin with telling a story it's from a joke book.

'There was once a baby who was very quiet. He never said 'Mama' or 'Dada'. He never said anything. When he was three he still hadn't said anything, and his mum and dad were worried. When he was five he still hadn't said anything and they were more worried than ever.

Then, one day when he was having his dinner, he said, 'Not enough salt!'

'Goodness me,' said his mum. 'You can talk! Why is it all these years you've never said anything?'

'Well,' said the boy, 'you see up till now everything's been all right.'^[i]

For many of us life is like this, it is fine enough and we amble along with every thing relatively alright, until it isn't at which point we might speak up and try and do something about it. But what if we are already accustomed to things being bad, what about the ways in which we have adapted to our circumstances, and thus in turn adjusted our circumstances to suit us? Marxism always anticipated an inevitable revolution, a moment when the proletariat would become self-conscious and rise up against the capitalist, taking production in to their own hands, but this never quite happened. This is when the concept of hegemonic ideology developed by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci becomes useful. Ideology is unrecognizable, it is accepted as the only natural or normal way of thinking. Social structures, good or bad, constitute our lived reality and they become a matter of common sense for us – they become hegemonic. Hegemony, just or unjust, appears inevitable, natural, a given. We respond to the world that has been shaped to trigger those very responses, without being conscious of the shaping, so our responses seem to be called for by the way the world is.

Philosopher Sally Haslanger describes the feed back loop of hegemony in terms of our eating habits: "In a less globalized world, food crops were grown to support the local cuisine. The local tastes and culinary techniques evolved in ways that take advantage of the crops.... Trends in cuisine become trends in production, which in turn affect trends in labour. Wheat is what is available, wheat is what we eat. But the wheat is available because of the impact of schemas on resources that establish farming practices, food distribution, culinary skills etc. Given the stability of such structures, culinary tastes conforms. In this context quinoa, soy or spelt tastes bad and has a funny texture too; so who would want to plant it? Hegemony colonizes our consciousness."^[ii]

In the parlance of supermarkets certain products become "essentials" or "basics" depending on the store. The taste for salt on food is born out of expectation, if you're used to lots of salt, you'll notice when its not there, and you will complain about it, you'll over look the social structures that have shaped this taste of yours, a taste we should note that contributes to your rising blood pressure, aging body, and accelerates the already rapidly approaching spectre of death, all the while lining the pockets of corporations that benefits from long sell by dates.

So the question is, how do we make our selves aware of things we take as 'givens'?

Patriarchal ideology becomes unrecognizable because it is part of the air that we breath: we believe that the way we act and are in the world is only the normal and natural way of thinking and being. It is this kind of acceptance of the status quo that leads people to use Darwin to justify their actions: the nice solid thing of science to explain away what would otherwise cause us to think and claim our agency, our responsibility. So it is here that I would like to talk about consciousness-raising and I wondered if I might start doing this by talking about the colour blue.

It is interesting because across the globe the ancient world did not have a word for the colour blue. Homer's sea is 'wine dark' in the Odyssey, the ancient Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament do not mention the colour, and neither does the Greek New Testament, while in the far east the Japanese had only one word, Ao, for both blue and green up until the modern period. Across all cultures colour names arrive in stages, and blue comes last. The Himba people of Namibia, when presented with a set of green tiles with only one blue amongst them, see the blue tile, but it is not noticed as distinct. They do not have a word that defines blue as separate from green. Language and the naming of things shape what and how we see in the world. The question is, when we don't have a word for something, do we even know that it is there?

Consciousness-raising is one way that we can do this. I wonder to what extent all art isn't an attempt to draw attention to something we had previously overlooked: What do we begin to see once social structures are pointed out to us – what happens once we are given a name for something? Clearly without that name we may see what happens or what is in the world, but we may not take notice of it.

The naming of things is important, and when it comes to gender feels like a double-edged sword. For while it might highlight a colour, it also owns things, people, pins them down, and nobody, I feel, wants to be pinned down in exactly that way.

For me this is where feminism becomes interesting. It is a task that is at war with itself. Feminism has a dual program: it is both a method to recognize gendered group treatment, and also a route to autonomy and liberation from such categorization or naming, and it seems that these two aims are often felt to be at odds with one another. But what I wonder is as a movement that oscillates between this process of bringing people together as members of a group, whilst attempting to probe the validity of such a grouping, can feminism prove to be a way to disrupt invisible hegemon, leaving us with no easier answers, but requiring us to think and evaluate our situation at each step along the way?

If feminism is to achieve its ends – gender equality – how can it hope to do so? In the context of the art world, when often the need for equality is assumed to have been met, how should we go about redressing the imbalance? Because though its easy to overlook, women continue to be massively under represented in spite of making up 60% of the student population. We might like to think that art transcends

our prejudices, but clearly it does not. There are two strands that I would like to think about here: Firstly the way that exhibitions frame work, and strategies for redressing the gender disparity of artist represented in galleries and museums. And secondly the way that art works can meet the challenge that feminism poses, as site for rethinking the notion of gender, and women's place within that.

It's for this reason that I have turned my attention to a practice of the 70s and 80s: open separatism as deployed both by curators, to frame exhibitions, and by artists who work in women only collectives. I say open separatism, because it seems to me that there is an invisible, yet pervasive separatism in almost full operation at all other times.

It is worth noting that from the 70s until the 90s representation of women as a proportion of artists exhibitions steadily inclined- though sadly since then they have dwindled. This of course throws the efforts the women's movement, and the subsequent backlash, into a new light. I wonder to what extent that movement is accountable for the progress made redressing the balance. To what extent the very existence of women only shows, worked as a tool of consciousness-raising with repercussions across the breath of the art world, reminding us all, not only when looking at women's work, but also when we look at men's work too that we do not look from a void: how we perceive interpret and understand the world is mediated by our experience of it, we carry our prejudices with us, where ever we go, including gallery spaces.

If we are to increase the number of women whose work is exhibited should curators, like special hidden forces, be holding these things in mind, presenting shows of all women artists, but without mentioning it, even in situations where elements of their gendered lives might play out in their work? Should we be open about affirmative action or pretend that its not happening, for fear that it will reinforce the gendered way we look – in the same way that segregation reinforces segregation. Does highlighting gender help us re-evaluate our looking and remind us that we're doing this already? Or in fact will these changes happen slowly over time in much same way that Marxists expect revolution?

All too often these women only shows are seen as arbitrary and ghettoizing, but what if they are a way of getting work seen? As Lynn Hershman Lesson says in *!WOMEN ART REVOLUTION*: "History is fragile it clings to the most obvious evidence that remains". Certainly I am grateful for the work of the women's movement for making a space for women's art to be seen, recorded. If something is good, isn't it worth seeing in any context as a means of preservation of sorts?

All this naming of artists, this framing of shows, all the discomfort we feel about labelling make me wonder if it's even ok to be a woman artist. Have we got it all wrong, is in fact an artist apriori "male" and does, therefore, an all women's show "out" one a woman, disqualifying those of us who might identify as women from the get go?

Is the category either too nebulous to mean anything, or so tightly packed a pigeon hole that we cannot possible move to make anything that would come close to being called creative? I would like to suggest that the oscillation between these two seemingly opposing describers of what it might mean to be named 'woman', sets us up in the ideal place from which to be artists.

The way in which one digests culture as a female identified being gives one a kind of double vision. Protagonists across our screens, in our novels, are predominantly men. As we look at art works we stand where, in most instances, a male creator stood. And yet we are not quite that. We will identify with male characters often out of necessity, and their female loves interests probably only grudgingly, splitting ourselves in two in the process.

Edward Said, in his 1994 Reith Lecture series, talks of the intellectual as an outsider, in exile often metaphorically, if not, as in his case literally. The intellectual is there to "raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma, rather than to produce them, to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations."^[iii] In many ways this is a fitting description of the role of the artist. The artist holds a unique space in our society: art is neither entertainment nor politics and as such can push for incremental power shifts, while escaping both the practicality of politics and the cozy conventions of entertainment. Art, as the thing that does not fit, provides a place for resistance: a space for the voice of the 'other', the marginalized. Women, as the archetypal 'other' are particular are well situated to draw on their experiences as outsiders: un-accommodated by the mainstream, though women may be integrated, they remain unassimilated by culture. From this peripheral perspective nothing is taken for granted or seen in isolation. This means that an idea or experience is counter posed with another therefore making them appear in both a new and unpredictable light.

What I would like to propose is this: for anything to be creative, in its fullest sense of the word, it has to resist the status quo, for to do anything else is just to repeat what is already out there. Repetition, particularly when done with self-conscious irony, makes for work that can never fail. It always has an alibi. It is always knowing and clever and definitely superior to all us lot. Like a surly teenager, it lacks generosity, reluctant to make the effort for fear of criticism. Used by feminists with the intention to undermine patriarchal representation it is often reactive and thus merely adaptive or self-limiting. This kind of work fits well with the kind of anything-goes neoliberal mindset, convenient for those who can trade on the right bodies, both male and female. For women this trade, in most cases, will be short lived, and does not escape or offer any alternatives to the narrow definition, as put forth by tradition, of female identity, all too often instead playing into its hands. Serving up a dish we are used to. This kind of empowerment feminism, while staking a claim for freedom of expression, pits bodies against bodies: it is divisive, and thus disarms any kind of group action that might provide a resistance to choke hold of neoliberal capitalism. It does not disrupt and enlarge the space we can occupy.

With this in mind I am all for the Kantian idea that true creativity, true freedom can only be self-created. For us to be responsible creatures we must create our own values, rather than wait for them to be given in a rulebook from above. This I feel is also the call of feminism, an oscillating declaration that one might be a woman, while also rewriting the very definition and questioning the very existence of the category.

But if we are to break down the gender binaries, and in many ways I am all for this, I don't want to do so in the name of my own solipsistic individualizing project, because to do so is dishonest: it is not to treat things as they are experienced in the world. While such maneuvers may be expedient in the fast paced world of the jet setting art scene, which favors a kind of atomizing, placeless-ness, it also abandons a whole swath of humanity that is treated on those terms. I especially don't want to do so in order to make work that "passes" as men's, though what women's work looks like, I have no idea.

So feminism wants to be permissive, but in such a permissive environment the mainstream is all too often the dominating force: with the result that our palates remain the same, our tastes don't change. This is not a reason to give up on a liberal attitude, and reminds me of a quote from the Russian Orthodox Monk, Starezt Silouan: "Keep your mind in hell, and despair not". But while it is important that we don't give up on liberalism, if we are to aspire to feminism, and for me this is an aspiration, an on going challenge, it is vital that we find ways to communicate it, to serve it up that are new, and sometimes unpalatable. It is only like this that we can begin to break down the structures that deliver us our neatly packaged identities as a task to be completed and complimented with add-ons and accessories, health regimes, therapies and outfits, a structure that persuades us that we must always be in the process of buying ourselves. Disrupting this conveyor belt of production will cause risk to the self, that non-part of us, that tries so hard to attach itself to something tangible, touchable and concrete.

I want to try to live and make work in a way that accepts the dual challenge that feminism poses, an oscillating force that I hope might rock the stable structure that keeps this delivery and distribution mechanism secure in its current form. I would like to hold myself to account, to give up my work for judgment, to risk it's failure, but without the crutch of new laws, that make outlaws of old ways and by ways.

And since I began with a joke, I thought I'd end with a joke, and one I felt fitting to the topic of who and what we do and don't serve. And it happens that this is the only joke I ever manage to remember

A hamburger walks in to a bar, and says to the bar man, "I'll have a whisky, please"

"Sorry" says the bar men, "we don't serve food".

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[i] Ahlberg, Janet and Allan The HA HA BONK BOOK, first published 1982, ISBN 978-0-14-031412-0

[ii] <http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/HaslangerBMCTAC.pdf>

[iii] <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00gmx4c>