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Intersectionality Visualized: An Analysis of Global Feminisms

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Intersectionality Visualized: An Analysis of *Global Feminisms*

Abstract:

This paper is a detailed analysis of the *Global Feminisms* exhibition held at the Brooklyn Museum in 2007. Seeking to understand the ways in which women curators have challenged the traditional male artistic canon through their practice, this paper engages in a close reading of the exhibition's design and the feminist artworks within it. The paper argues that the *Global Feminisms* exhibition visualizes intersectionality, bringing together the artistic voices of women of diverse backgrounds whose works explore colonialism, sexuality, self identity, motherhood, nationality, and other themes to form a rich tapestry that is not contained within the frame of the European canon. This paper illuminates an important movement toward feminist curatorial activism in the spaces of museums globally.

Introduction:

Displayed in the Brooklyn Museum's 2007 exhibition, *Global Feminisms*, was a tapestry depicting the Cuban national flag. The artwork, created by Tania Bruguera, is a textile woven entirely from the hair of Cuban women, drawing attention to the agency and resistance of women during Cuba's war of Independence. The method of creating the flag from diverse fragments of human hair embodies the broader curatorial methods at play in the *Global Feminisms* exhibition. In the same way that Bruguera was conveying the story of her native country through tangible elements of female everyday experience, *Global Feminisms* pieced together a rich tapestry of women artists from diverse cultural backgrounds. Bruguera's piece also encompasses the primary themes of politics, identity, culture, the making and breaking of gender roles, and female empowerment that were at the heart of the *Global Feminisms* exhibition. Curated by Linda

Nochlin and Maura Reilly, *Global Feminisms* was an exhibition that sought to channel intersectional feminism into the space of the museum. Countering the idea of the Western canon as well as the exclusionary elements of the feminist movement itself, this exhibition explored how art could be way a of dismantling and transcending cultural limitations and boundaries imposed on women in both the historical and present world. Providing a close interpretation of several important pieces in the exhibition, and thinking about the ways in which the exhibition directly responded to the feminism's limitations and the historical restraints placed on women in the art world, I will analyse the ways in which Reilly and Nochlin participated in a form of curatorial activism throughout *Global Feminisms*. I will argue that Reilly and Nochlin's exhibition provided an intersectional curatorial space for the expression of female artistic experience beyond the traditional frame of the Western canon.

Background Context:

In order to explore the curatorial practices used by Nochlin and Reilly in *Global Feminisms*, it is first important to define intersectionality and to explore the development of feminist thought that led up to the exhibition in the 21st century. The concept of intersectionality was first defined by the activist and theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 essay "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." In this essay, Crenshaw explored the ways in which women of color are marginalized not only in society, but also within feminist thought. Crenshaw's argument countered the notion of a singular definition of female experience, arguing that feminism up until that point had not properly addressed the intersections

of race and gender that converge in the experience of women of color. She suggested that “for feminist theory...to embrace the experiences and concerns of Black women, the entire framework that has been used as a basis for translating ‘women’s experience’ or ‘Black experience’ into concrete policy demands must be rethought and recast.”¹ While Crenshaw’s point about intersectionality was largely addressing the marginalization of Black women in America, intersectionality has since been adopted and expanded in third and fourth wave feminism. The term now signifies the need to recognize the overlapping constructs of race, class, sexuality, and gender that affect the diverse lives of women globally. Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality responded to first and second wave feminism, which, while pivotal and groundbreaking for the freedoms and legal rights of women, had primarily focused on the experiences of white women in “first world” countries.

Intersectionality went hand in hand with third wave feminism, a development of feminist thought that focused on diversity and inclusion. As Edward Burlton Davis has argued in *Third Wave Feminism and Transgender*, “the philosophical third wave, as an ideal, is critical of fixed identity positioning and is differences friendly in its openness to inclusion for subjectivities not previously thought of as associated with, or in need of assistance from, a feminist movement.”² Similarly, Leslie Heywood has discussed how third wave “feminist ideas about *identity* embrace notions of contradiction, multiplicity, and ambiguity, building on postmodern theory’s critique of

¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antodiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 1 (1989): 140.

² Edward Burlton Davies, *Third Wave Feminism and Transgender: Strength through Diversity* (Routledge: 2018), 200.

ideas about the unified self, and engaging with the fluid nature of gender and sexual identity”³

This reframing of the feminist narrative is central to Reilly and Nochlin’s curation of *Global Feminisms*. The exhibition aimed to break down the perception that all women experience everything in the same way, adopting a multivocal approach that highlighted the individual experiences of women. The resulting exhibition was a multimedia convergence of feminist art that made intersectionality visible and audible in the gallery space of the Brooklyn Museum.

The Exhibition:

The *Global Feminisms* exhibition opened on March 23, 2007 in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition featured the artworks of female artists from 62 countries, each of which explored different facets of the female experience. The diversity of the featured artists was mirrored in the large variety of artistic mediums used in the exhibition. Consisting of digital and film photography, print media such as lithography, paintings, installation pieces, sculpture, and more, the exhibition was intersectional in both content and form. The *Global Feminisms* exhibition can be situated in a broader context of feminist artistic activism that was rising in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. In 1986, the Guerilla Girls released their report cards, which drew attention to the underrepresentation of women artists in New York’s City’s most prominent art galleries. Similarly, Alison Bechdel coined her famous “Bechdel Test” in 1985, a method through which to measure gender inequality in literary works. Despite these efforts, the privileging of the white male literary and artistic canon persisted into the twenty first century. As Maura Reilly has noted in a 2015 issue of *ArtNews*, problems of representation in museums are far from resolved. Reilly

³ Leslie Heywood, *The Womens Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-wave Feminism* (Greenwood Press, 2006), 257-258.

cites the most recent survey of The Met by the Guerrilla Girls, writing “As of the Guerrilla Girls’ last count, in 2012, only 4 percent of artists on display at the Metropolitan Museum were women – worse than in 1989.”⁴ *Global Feminisms* sought to enact tangible change by translating the ephemeral print culture activism of the *Guerrilla Girls* into a fully-realized exhibition, bringing the spirit of feminist street art into the space of the Brooklyn Museum. Moreover, in the exhibition catalogue that was published alongside the *Global Feminisms* exhibition, Nochlin and Reilly explicitly state that *Global Feminisms* was a direct response to an exhibition that Nochlin helped to curate in 1976: *Women Artists: 1550-1950*. Although *Women Artists* was incredibly revolutionary in the developing landscape of feminism in the artistic world of the twentieth century, the exhibition nonetheless used the West as its centre. As Nochlin and Reilly note, “*Women Artists*...had the specific goal of reclaiming women lost from the Western historical canon”⁵ In the same way that first wave feminists fought for the right to participate in areas of society traditionally dominated by men, the *Women Artists* exhibition argued for the reframing of the male canon to include women artists who had been overlooked throughout history. This exhibition can be understood as a counterpoint to what Paul O’Neill describes in his article, “The Curatorial Turn.” O’Neill suggests that “despite any curatorial self-reflexivity in recent large-scale exhibitions that may exist toward the global effects of ‘biennialization’, the periphery still has to follow the discourse of the center.”⁶ Elaine Showalter has raised a similar point, writing that the revisionist feminist preoccupation with “correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent on it and retards our

⁴ Maura Reilly, "Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes," *ArtNews*, May 26, 2015.

⁵ Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (London: Merrell, 2007), 15.

⁶ Paul O’Neill, “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse,” In Rugg, *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*, ed. Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick, (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books 2012), 17.

progress in solving our own theoretical problems.”⁷ Rather than arguing for the celebration and recognition of women in conversations about what constitutes canonical Western art, *Global Feminisms* argues that we should dismantle the notion of the Western canon itself.

Global Feminisms goes about the process of breaking down the concept of the canon through its style of curation and display. In *Global Feminisms*, Nochlin and Reilly created a fluid curatorial space where conventional distinctions of nationality and chronology were dissolved. The physical layout of the Elizabeth Sackler Gallery allowed for the transformation of white cube gallery conventions. While white cube galleries are conventionally designed to be depoliticized spaces for the display of modern “high” art, the blank walls of the Elizabeth Sackler Gallery served the political purpose of elevating feminist voices and countering traditional artistic representations of women. The gallery also subverted the conventional white cube space through its architectural angularity, the intersecting diagonal lines of the gallery’s walls giving visual form to the intersectional curation of *Global Feminisms*, and to the new perspectives evoked in the exhibition. Moreover, rather than organizing artworks in the linear fashion typical of the Western museum, the curators chose to group the pieces into four broad sections. This thematic approach countered the Western colonial ideal of a well-organized taxonomy of art and artefacts, and undermined the imperialist tendency to categorize objects in chronological and national ways. Nochlin and Reilly elaborate on this style of display in their catalogue, noting by avoiding placing the artworks on a single horizontal timeline, they were able to not only challenge the linear structure of the white male canon, but to dispute the

⁷ Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” *Critical inquiry* 8, no. 2 (December 1, 1981), 183.

“monocultural, so-called first-world feminism that assumes a sameness among women,” and to “help open up a more flexible, less restrictive space for feminism as a worldwide activist project.”⁸ By treating their exhibition as a way to amplify the artistic voices of women from a multitude of geographical, social, cultural, and political contexts, Nochlin and Reilly address what scholars such as Su-lin Yu call the “essentialist, monolithic” nature of Western feminism that “ignores the heterogeneity of women in the third world.”⁹

In addition to the overall mission of the exhibition, the four thematic groupings themselves had the goal of deconstructing stereotypes commonly associated with the female experience. The section, “Life Cycles,” features art that subverts female gender roles such as conventions of motherhood. “Identities” was a collection of works meant to reveal the fluid rather than fixed nature of identity, while the works in “Emotions” examined and undercut the historical representation of women as overly emotional, irrational, and hysterical. Finally, the “Politics” theme highlighted artists whose political surroundings contributed to the development of their artistic voice. Nochlin and Reilly note that the thematic approach was also chosen as a way to have the artworks in the exhibition engage in dialogue with one another. They write that the “looseness of the four categories...allows for a wide range of artists to be exhibited and shown in juxtaposition to others whose modes of practice, socio-cultural, racial, economic, and personal situations might be radically different from their own.”¹⁰ By creating a curatorial collage of global artworks, Nochlin and Reilly visualize intersectionality. While displaying the artwork by nationality would have highlighted the broad scope of the exhibition and the diversity

⁸ Reilly and Nochlin, *Global Feminisms*, 16.

⁹ Su-Lin Yu, “Third-Wave Feminism: A Transnational Perspective,” *Asian Journal of Women’s Studies* 15, no. 1 (2016): 9-10.

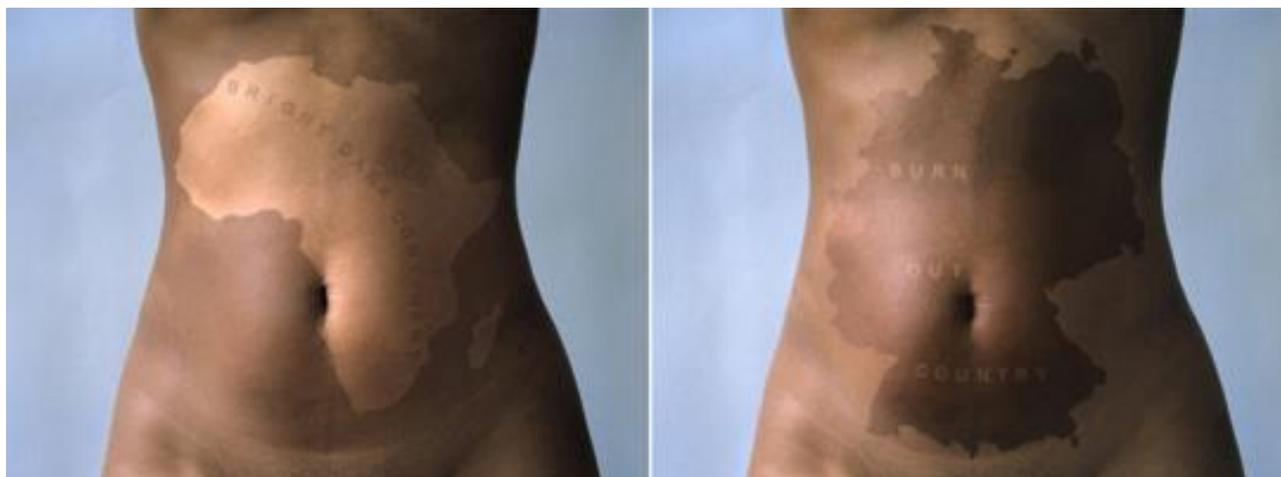
¹⁰ Reilly and Nochlin, *Global Feminisms*, 39.

of the artists included, it would nonetheless have placed the artists in separate boxes. The thematic approach enables threads of global female artistic expression to be interwoven in one gallery space. *Global Feminisms* liberated female art from ties to the western canon and the restrictive requirements necessary to be included in it. In doing so, Nochlin and Reilly answer the concerns of scholars Elisabeth Callihan and Kaywin Feldman, who state that museums need to adapt to properly address intersectionality and to fix systemic issues of museum equity, from representation on museum directorial boards down to the artworks on display.¹¹ Nochlin and Reilly welcomed and celebrated the difference of female experience, using curatorial activism to bring intersectionality to the forefront of the exhibition.

The Artworks:

This section provides a close analysis of specific works that Reilly and Nochlin included in *Global Feminisms*, exploring how we can view artworks as microcosms of the broader exhibition. If we pay close attention to the details of artworks, it becomes clear that the curators chose pieces that reiterated the main objectives of the exhibition as a whole. One of the most fascinating pieces in *Global Feminisms* is Ingrid Mwangi's work, *Static Drift*. The piece consists of two printed photographs, both of which depict Mwangi herself, her body illustrated with the geographic maps of Africa and Germany.

¹¹ Elisabeth Callihan and Kaywin Feldman, "Presence and Power: Beyond Feminism in Museums," *Journal of Museum Education* 43, no. 3 (2018): 181.



The piece visualizes Mwangi's double consciousness and subjectivity as a woman who is both German and African; it presents her body as a text where cultural and ethnic identities have been inscribed. Mwangi's *Static Drift* therefore makes visual the intersectionality that is at the core of the *Global Feminisms* exhibition, the piece drawing attention to the fact that Mwangi's identity cannot be encapsulated through overarching terms of nationality such as "German," or "African." Rather, the piece highlights the different intersectional threads that make up Mwangi's experience as a female artist. By treating her own physical body as a canvas for the creation of her art, Mwangi draws attention to the ways in which colonialism has literally and metaphorically inscribed non-Western bodies with stereotypes and assumptions. The medium used to create the piece is another important reminder of this. To achieve the effect of the maps superimposed onto her body, Mwangi used stencils and exposed herself to the sun. The idea of the stencil speaks to the preconceived notions of what constitutes Western and non-Western identity in the colonial imagination - the stencil can be seen as a metaphor for the way that colonial powers have viewed marginalized people as hollow cutouts rather than fully individualized human beings.

Within these hollow cutouts of Germany and Africa, however, Mwangi flips colonial constructions on their heads, asserting her agency as both a Black and German female artist. She does this primarily by subverting colonial imagery and language that perpetuated oppression. For example, postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said have written extensively on how colonial powers long characterized Africa and other non-Western countries as "dark," and uncivilized, while portraying Europe as enlightened, rational, and emblematic of human civilization.¹² In Mwangi's piece, however, Africa is lighter than Germany, and it bears the inscription "Bright Dark Continent," while Germany has the inscription "Burn out country." Mwangi's piece thus evokes and subverts colonial perceptions of Africa and Europe, reclaiming and reframing language from colonialism's past to create expressive artwork in the present. The *Global Feminisms* exhibition made this type of artistic self-fashioning possible. In the context of a traditional museum, Mwangi's piece would have had to have been placed in some form of rigid category, likely by her nationality. This begs the question, however, would her work belong in a collection of German works or African works? *Global Feminisms* bypassed these traditional categories, allowing Mwangi's work to exist in a fluid curatorial space that broke down the limitations of the Western canon.

¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 16.

Another important piece that illuminates the exhibition's themes is Lisa Reihana's photographic work, *Mahuika* from her larger portfolio of "Digital Marae" artworks. In the photograph is a woman who is meant to represent the Indigenous Polynesian deity of Mahuika. She is dressed in layers upon layers of red and black tulle and satin-like fabrics, and at first appears to be standing upright with one of her hands raised as if holding a power within that cannot be visualized. As the description of the piece on the Brooklyn Museum's website states, the deity depicted in the piece is Mahuika, the "goddess from whom the hero Māui obtained the secret of making fire."¹³ Reihana's choice of mythological subject matter in the piece is significant, showcasing the fact that the powerful element of fire in Polynesian culture originally resided in the hands of a female goddess. Moreover, Reihana challenges stereotypes of female beauty by choosing to depict Mahuika as an elderly woman. Upon first viewing the piece, Mahuika appears to be standing; looking closer, however, we can see that the subject is being aided by what appears to be a wheelchair behind her, her left hand resting on the arm of the device. Despite the fact that the subject is actually seated, she is nonetheless in an elevated, powerful position in the frame of the piece, highlighting her agency. By casting an elderly woman in a light of empowerment, Reihana subverts our expectations about beauty, age and femininity in art. The power of the subject is further emphasized by her clothing, which appears



¹³ "Mahuika, from the 'Digital Marae' Series," Brooklyn Museum, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/5029>.

to be smoldering as if there is flame beneath her that has not been extinguished. Also, the sloped form of her skirt resembles a volcano, a strong structure that is steadfast in the landscape. In addition to evoking the physical geography of New Zealand, the country Reihana is from, the volcano-like dress speaks to the idea of *Global Feminisms* as an eruption of female expression after centuries of oppression and constant constraint under the hegemony of the white male canon.

Finally, Reihana's main concept of the "digital marae" is helpful for reflecting on the *Global Feminisms* exhibition. As the scholar Natacha Gagné reminds us, in Māori culture, a marae is a communal place of gathering.¹⁴ Reihana's work is a digital "marae" in that it brings together diverse elements and iconography from Polynesian culture and weaves them into a single photographic tapestry. This artistic practice embodies Nochlin and Reilly's curatorial approach. *Global Feminisms* was itself a physical marae - a meeting place for intersectional female art to gather and converse. This approach rejected the construction of the Western canon that had dominated the art world for centuries, enabling female artists to express themselves freely in an intersectional space. The exhibition was a realization of Nochlin's earlier theoretical work, which explored the systemic oppression of female experience in the history of art, and called for change in the way that female artwork was contextualized and displayed in museums. Like Reihana, who depicted a goddess in her work, reclaiming subject matter that was reserved for male artists in traditional Polynesian culture, the *Global Feminisms* exhibition disrupted and moved beyond the conventional canon. The exhibition's dissolution of the canon, and its incorporation of digital media anticipated fourth wave feminism, one of the avenues where

¹⁴ Gagné Natacha, *Being Māori in the City: Indigenous Everyday Life in Auckland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 36.

diverse female artists are currently asserting power and agency. *Global Feminisms* serves as a reminder of the ongoing use of art as a tool of female resistance against oppression in our contemporary world.

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