

# APPROACHES TO PHOTOGRAPHY: PAPERS FROM III CONGRESO INTERNACIONAL DE DOCUMENTACIÓN FOTOGRAFICA (MEXICO CITY, 6-9 MARCH 2018)

## Women photographers in Europe: a fresh, feminine approach

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to understand the role of women in the field of photography after the second wave of feminism in Europe.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The grounded theory on the position of women in contemporary photography has been contrasted with the information collected by the authors in previous research studies on the presence of women photographers in the main museum collections in Europe.

**Findings** – Gender inequality in the various artistic disciplines is a current sociopolitical problem Western countries have been fighting against for several decades. After the resurgence of social movements in the USA and Europe in the 1960s, an artistic movement called feminist art emerged whose significance should be assessed.

**Research limitations/implications** – The paper proposed a general approximation, a foundation on the state of art, which may be implemented in the future with more data coming from other collections. It should be taken into account that this aim is a work in progress in a large scale of the research.

**Practical implications** – This paper includes implications for the development of a more efficient strategy to create a balance situation in the number of men and women photographers at the museum collections.

**Originality/value** – The paper identified a lack of practical analysis on the current averages of female photographers in art institutions.

**Keywords** Europe, Women, Identity, Museums, Photography, Feminist art

**Paper type** Research paper

### 1. Introduction

The first studies on the status of women in art coincide with the feminist movement of the 1960s. Together with the political and artistic practices, theoretical and ideological reflections were made as seen in the increasing number of publications per year. Also, it was then that the role of women artists in the field of photography began to emerge and be appreciated (Carson and Pajczkowska, 2001).

Photography was born in the first half of the nineteenth century, and like the rest of artistic areas, it was a field dominated by men. For a long time, women were only passive actors, models

in front of the camera lens, objects to be photographed. At the end of the nineteenth century, photography became one of the few creative activities allowed to women. Since then, women would work as photographers in an artistic field created by men (Legido García, 2004). The 1960s marked a boom in the feminist movement and also the time when women would rebel through photography to denounce the unfair situations and the roles women were subjected to in a patriarchal society. Thus, photography would turn into a mean for female artists to reclaim the right to create their own image using their bodies as spaces for creation and criticism.

Despite all this, feminist demands have continued to this day, and female photographers are committed to both securing equality in practice and bringing to light the role of women throughout history. The purpose is to reveal a distinct identity, which most often has been hidden behind the shadow of male

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power and impositions, and highlight the achievements of women artists in all creative fields.

With that in mind, this paper is intended to examine the role of women in the field of photography after the second wave of feminism in Europe, a period in which women use cameras as empowering tools to express, vindicate, construct and deconstruct the female identity and the sociopolitical situation. It is at this time that the feminine role is shown both in the private and public spheres for the first time.

The goals of this study focus on the feminist movement in European photography, the presence of female photographers in the collections of the most important modern art museums in the continent, and the positioning and visibility of women photographers in the social networks.

## 2. The feminist movement in European photography

The second wave of the feminist movement started to emerge after the Second World War with universal suffrage. With French and British suffragettes led by Emmeline Pankhurst (1858-1928), the feminine debate gained momentum and reached middle- and lower-class women. During the second half of the twentieth century, the first gender equality policies began to be implemented, even though in this first stage, they were limited by age and social class (De Miguel, 1995). Universal suffrage would lead to claiming the right to education, which until then had been limited to upper-class women and only continued to secondary education with the pretext that above all women had to be good wives and mothers. It was only after 1880 that women started to go to college (Jönsson, 2002).

After achieving the right to vote and to receive an education, the second feminist wave, which coincided with the rise of civic movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Europe, aimed at other important goals for women in their vindication of gender equality. Then, the struggle centered on abolishing the commodification of the human body in media and advertising, women's access to positions of power, gender-based violence, female sexuality and abortion. These claims reach into the present day, but in the 1990s, a third feminist wave – which continued the fight for the goals of the second wave – added new issues and raised new questions addressed by approaches such as queer theory or ecofeminism (Karlyn, 2005).

Art is one of the means used by women to claim their rights and strengthen their sociopolitical position against patriarchy. In the field of photography, as a result of the social movements, a feminist perspective began to be asserted in the 1970s and has continued until now. A growing number of women have been using photography as provocation and social critique. The artists involved in these movements were mostly middle- or upper-class white women born in the USA or Europe, with university degrees and liberal ideology. The paradigm they challenged was Western patriarchy with its alienation of subcultural minorities which depart from its canons of “normalcy.” The issues addressed (the body, womanhood, sex, gender, race and homosexuality) were controversial subjects of the works and the taboo concepts in a consumer society which aims at manipulation of simple forms.

Throughout the history of art, there has been a reduced number of female artists (Chadwick and Chadwick, 1990). Paradoxically, the classic artistic tradition has been dominated by the representation of the female body. Men have customarily exerted their power over the creation of the female figure, and male artists have shaped that figure according to the masculine imagination of each period always dominated by a patriarchal imposition.

The different canons of beauty established throughout history have corresponded to the patriarchal definitions of femininity and have been recognized and accepted by women as models to be followed. As a result, women have been subjected to the masculine imagination in every age in an attempt to reach an unrealistic ideal of perfection, virtue, beauty and happiness. This alleged model of feminine perfection created under the supervision of men would eventually determine female identity and establish the appropriateness of actions and attitudes.

Female photographers understood early that the image of women created and disseminated by men had been guided historically by a tendency to trivialization and commodification (Muñoz-Muñoz and González-Moreno, 2014). Hence, they took the decision to completely engage in photography and reshape their own image to position themselves actively in the field. The opportunity to represent the female body was empowering to construct a woman's identity.

The pioneers in this creative movement are multidisciplinary artists whose work encompasses photography, video, performance art and installations exploring the potential of contemporary art for expression and liberation. Most photographers use self-portrait as an affirmation of the female body and of their own identity. The artists leading the movement in Europe use the same tools and strategies that were being used in the USA. The list of forerunners in feminist photography in Europe includes Irina Ionesco (Paris, 1930), Jo Spencer (London, 1934-2003), Helena Almeida (Lisbon, 1935), Esther Ferrer (San Sebastian, 1937), Martine Frank (Antwerp, 1938-2012), Karin Mack (Vienna, 1940), Ulrike Rosenbach (Bad Salzdetfurth, 1943), Renate Berthman (Vienna, 1943), Katharina Sieverding (Prague, 1944), Annegret Soltau (London, 1946), Penny Slinger (London, 1947), Birgit Jürgenssen (Vienna, 1949-2003), Sanja Ivekovic (Zagreb, 1949), Ouka Leele (Madrid, 1957), Rineke Dijkstra (Sittard, 1959), Sam Taylor-Wood (Croydon, 1967), Vanessa Becroft (Genoa, 1969), Hannah Starkey (Belfast, 1971) and Alexandra Croitoru (Bucharest, 1975).

## 3. Women photographers in the collections of European museums of modern art

Photography was one of the first mediums where women had a significant access to artistic creation. Undoubtedly, this was made easier by the questionable status of photography, largely neglected by the institutions devoted to the fine arts. Despite the advantages provided by the technological novelty of photography, the history of women photographers started by relinquishing authorship over their works to close male relatives, fathers or brothers so that they could be put up in the market or achieve some significance. Women could then access the medium and do the work, but getting professional or artistic recognition was a different issue altogether.

Over time, photography became an art and was incorporated to museum collections throughout the world. Nowadays, holdings of any museum of modern art include large photograph collections and the freedom derived from the lack of an academic tradition such as those of drawing, painting or sculpture was curtailed by the institution, which accepted novelty without demur.

However, being a contemporary medium which has accompanied social revolutions during the nineteenth and the twentieth century, photography can be expected to break free from the weight of tradition and continue to be a tool for change, capable of reducing long-standing inequalities and pursuing the abolition of elitist privileges. For this reason, number of women photographers in the collections of the most important museums is expected to be larger than that of women painters and sculptors in the past.

Although the number of female artists, especially the number of photographers, has increased in art institutions, their presence in permanent photography collections is reduced. Women continue to take a backseat in institutions run by men. Within the patriarchal system, the problem is being addressed with equality policies which are not implemented consistently in the governance policies of museums or the acquisition of works for their collections.

In the most important museums of Europe, the percentage of works signed by women photographers is now at 17.3 on an average. Only in The Astrup Fearnley Museet in Oslo, the institution with the highest female representation, the ratio reaches 33 per cent. The rest have an alarmingly low proportion of women artists, in particular the Tate Modern and the Hermitage Museum, where the ratio of female artists does not reach 1 per cent (Muñoz-Muñoz and González-Moreno, 2017).

Museums have laws and regulations to promote equal opportunities for men and women, but the data obtained about the rate of women in the collections analyzed reveal the ineffectiveness of those policies. Paradoxically, 70 per cent of the main modern art museums were established in Europe during the same decade when equality laws were passed, and it was then that many of their permanent collections were acquired.

The present study takes photography as a case in point of inequality in contemporary art, but we can hypothesize that the situation can be similar in other fine arts, and consequently, research is required to monitor the effects of equality policies. To say the least, institutions have a long task ahead to mitigate the problem on at least two fronts. On the one hand, a social awareness should be created among the different types of museum visitors, and on the other hand, the system of acquisitions for permanent collections and the organization of temporary exhibitions should be rethought.

#### 4. The visibility of European women photographers and their work in social networks

Photography is one of the artistic fields which women accessed more quickly and in greater numbers, which turned it into a key tool for the representation and support of the feminist movement. However, the shift from production to distribution and exhibition often presents an insurmountable obstacle. The

creation of works with a feminist lens is relatively easy, but getting them efficiently into the institutional channels of distribution and the art market is a more complex task. This difficulty functions as an easy and effective hindrance to get messages across because, even when works reach museums and galleries, they participate in a system that keeps women away from decision-making positions. “Allowing” the exhibition of works with a radical edge constitutes a mode of possession by institutions with a patriarchal tradition, and as a consequence, messages become powerless in their implicit acceptance and continuation of the status quo. The exhibition of feminist art sometimes reveals a patronizing attitude.

The conflict in the ideological and political struggle is often found between the disclosure of the intimate, the body under attack by the structures of bio-power, and its easy control after accepting the inclusion in the museum panopticon (Hetherington, 2011). Once in the museum, the obscene comes into play, it becomes a show and ceases to be transgressive. This partly explains some changes in the technical production of photography and more crucially the changes in distribution and exhibition. In the digital world, dominated by the “rhizomatic structures” of the internet (Zafra Alcaraz, 2004), social networks have become the new alternative space for art institutions with the advantage of its massive horizontal dissemination that is free from hierarchical impositions.

A large number of young artists and photographers are taking the helm from the older generation and exploiting the great potential of digital images and the opportunities provided by social networks. But the hopes of democratization are not easily fulfilled. New difficulties arise in the dissemination of feminist photography related to the disclosure of the intimate. Social technologies have produced a shift in what it means to be public or private. A second obstacle for new photographers is censorship, which against all odds has found its way in a 2.0 model capable of limiting the expression of content on the internet by means of complex mechanisms of filtering and blocking. This is a highly topical subject in social networks, and a campaign against this type of censorship has been launched on Facebook and Instagram called #freethenipple (Chemaly, 2014).

Feminist photography moves in social circles away from the academia, museums and great photography awards given by institutions run by men with a comparatively low feminine representation in both in the management and the catalogs. Thus, new women photographers disseminate their work through social networks such as Flickr, Instagram or Pinterest, where they can reach a large audience. These social technologies guarantee instant publication of contents, possibility to receive users’ feedback and flexibility of a versatile and dynamic medium which adapts to changing needs quickly.

It is then easy to find the most significant contemporary women photographs in social networks and observe their impact in the number of social shares among users. These artists most often work with images of the body and so need to elude forms of censorship where patriarchy relies on new formulas and moral codes giving rise to new paradoxes; a male nipple does not cause any problem, but the female ones are banned on Facebook or Instagram. Meanwhile, the internet

allows the existence of countless porn sites, and there is a booming market around targeted banner ads and pop-ups which annoy users with all kind of sexist messages.

Among the most recognized women photographers using the social networks to disseminate their work, we can mention the following: Isabel Tallos (Madrid, 1983) is a Spanish photographer who works exclusively with self-portraits which call into question the female body in space and the relationship between public and private; Juno Calypso (London, 1989) represents a very different concept of female reality and fiction from that portrayed in the media; Arvida Byström (Stockholm, 1991) is a model, photographer and digital artist renowned for challenging perceptions of femininity regularly posing with her body hair on show or showing her cellulite; Alexandra Sophie (Paris, 1992) works mainly for prestigious fashion magazines connecting the female identity with nature and the body; and Evelyn Bencicova (Bratislava, 1992), a photographer who moves between artistic and commercial photography, portraits nude female figures in compositions which highlight a concept of beauty departing from current canons.

## 5. Conclusions

The feminist art movement in photography is growing and gaining momentum in the history of photography. There are increasing number of women who use the camera as medium of expression and rebellion against established female roles.

Despite the strength of this movement, female photographers are at a disadvantage regarding artistic recognition and dissemination compared to male artists. The disparity is striking, and women still have a minor presence in photograph collections. At present, a work authored by a male photographer has a better chance at being exhibited and sold than one authored by a woman. It becomes evident that equality policies in the institutional circuit have been ineffective, as women are still underrepresented in permanent collections, with a presence around 15 per cent.

For their part, female artists, aware of the dealings of the art market, have found a new mean for the dissemination of their work on social networks and non-institutional digital platforms where women can shed the weight of tradition by avoiding museums and galleries.

There is a need to make a deep analysis of acquisition policies in museum institutions to implement gender equality effectively so that the construction and representation of the feminine world stands at the same level as that of male artists, and a feminist history of art is made possible.

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Bibliotecas de Mujeres: cooperación entre las bibliotecas feministas españolas (El profesional de la información, 2010). Ana M. Muñoz-Muñoz is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: [anamaria@ugr.es](mailto:anamaria@ugr.es)

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