

# School of Etiquette

Bettina Steinbrügge

To address the topic of feminism offends against the current 'etiquette', despite the fact that it 'ran' through German-language art sections last year. So we, the three curators of this project, came upon the theme of feminism not because we called ourselves feminists in the 1980s and 1990s. The questions of what has become of feminism and why this concept is so marginalised and negatively connoted today, were enough to prompt us to initiate this project. Why is it so difficult to call oneself a feminist today, and would it make sense to reformulate the feminist agenda? Would this really lead to a *new* feminism or would only new, legitimate demands be made that can indeed be regarded as historicised although not yet asserted, as one could gather from the weekly *Die Zeit*.<sup>1</sup> It is a paradox that feminism came up with an extraordinarily successful concept which asserted many of its concerns and, surprisingly, appears to have mutated into the most uncool and least commanding social topic in the past 20 years. To place oneself in this context and to also offend against the 'etiquette' in this way, still means to marginalise oneself and endanger one's position in society – in spite of Gertrude Stein, Emma Goldmann, Marie Curie, Rosemarie Trockel, Margarete Mitscherlich, and many others... The list could be continued endlessly. It must be pointed out that nowadays many women are left alone when confronted with the change in gender relations, marginalised by both men and women. The idea that individual demands should be articulated on the level of society has disappeared along with the *flower power* movement and other action groups of the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Personally, I stick to the song *School of Etiquette* by *Boyscout*, which unmasks our society's attitude as the new middle-class mentality. In the current 'School of Etiquette', women – in their own eyes and the eyes of others – should be independent (not too much so), self-assured (but not make men insecure), successful (but not earn more money than men), and in addition sexy (to make the world a little prettier). Or she is the manager of the family home and of the enterprise called a nuclear family, the choice is

10

all hers. She might as well have worked. Consequently, the objectives of feminism could be considered as fulfilled.

But somehow I have the faint feeling that something is fundamentally wrong with this system and that the current image of the emancipated woman has quite a few unfathomed depths. At some point one becomes fed up with the fact that apparently it is man's estimation that enhances one's status and that the great women in our surroundings are hindered in their grandiosity by the sham democratic and legitimised mediocrity of their environment. My issue here is less to run an attack or to strike a sweeping feminist blow; instead it seems to be quite clear that the system makes it hard for both men and women to attain true equality. In Germany, the legal and social systems are to a large extent based on a traditional understanding of roles. A working woman with children is hardly accepted by society's unconscious – why else is the childcare system so disputed? One cannot comprehend the discussion rationally, especially when looking at Scandinavia and other neighbouring countries. In addition, many women appear to become reticent even when entering university and willingly accept their traditional place in society. And even if women reach a similar status, they are bound to the male-dominated system in terms of to their freedom of action. For feminism only takes place within a fixed frame or a society's 'etiquette'. Any step towards liberation simultaneously entails restriction, because the politically determined frame is limited. As long as society's attitude does not change, political measures will have but a marginal effect. For this reason, many debates on feminism appear artificial, outdated and boring. Many demands were already put forward in the 1970s. If they haven't yet been fulfilled, I find it all the more legitimate to repeat them over and over again like a mantra. The fact that these demands are not new doesn't mean that they are bad or unjustified. The issue is much too important to measure it using the yardstick of today's marketing, representation and image policies. It is simply not about hype.

In this respect, the term *cooling out*, coined in the 1960s, plays an interesting role, since it forms the theoretical basis of what is currently going on.<sup>3</sup> Pierre Bourdieu brought it up in his essay on the *illusion of equality* and defined *cooling out* as the stepwise latent disintegration of women while studying, and later in professional life. Furthermore, a study conducted at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) also gives clear evidence that discrimination in the 1990s was subtler, but it was and still is firmly rooted in the collective unconscious.<sup>4</sup> In his

11

latest publication *Masculine Domination*,<sup>5</sup> Bourdieu points out that the approval of male power is not voluntary but based on the direct subservience of the socialised women. This subservience appears to be voluntary, but in fact it is the result of the social power relations. It seems quite logical that anyone who possesses power is not necessarily inclined to give it away. We must understand this. Therefore the assertion of feminist themes is clearly a political issue which often fails due to the structures of capitalism, and thus the male system. In her book *Über die Mühsal der Emanzipation*,<sup>6</sup> Margarete Mitscherlich showed how arduous it is for women to constantly deal with false values, i.e., values based on the male social system. But have the alleged right values ever been defined? How can the range of themes be altered so that women's magazines will no longer have to function as a substitute for female themes? Any debate on values in Germany today is dominated by a retrograde discourse aiming at re-establishing the old social system. A debate on values taking into account today's existing ways of life, however, would be a true achievement.

**The situation** is completely muddled, for to change people's way of thinking is one of society's most difficult tasks. We are all much too enlightened to again take up the dichotomy of man and woman. Nothing is further from our thoughts than instigating a gender battle. We are all too aware that men are also trapped in their roles. None of the shrewdest and most enlightened theories and movements of the past decades appears to have succeeded in breaking open centuries-old thought. But resignation is uncalled for here; what is needed is simply the desire for more.

**So how can** new life be brought to the feminist movement? Or rather: How can women be given enough self-confidence so that they would insist on their rights in everyday life? Because the feminist movement is declared as over by many, criticism is seldom heard. Feminism has been 'outsourced' and mainly takes place in small private circles or in exclusive university research departments. The discussions on gender and feminism have been institutionalized as part of what a society teaches, and this is connected to the good feeling that someone somewhere is dealing with the issue. In politics, even gender mainstreaming has become an acknowledged discussion giving the impression that the system is also addressing issues of equal rights. However, the concept of *gender* is not entirely unproblematic. Gender studies are a trend-setting academic discipline, but unfortunately they made feminism and its demands disappear from the public view. While theories on

feminism and gender are meanwhile highly developed the way men and women deal with one another in everyday life still adheres to set by biological patterns that often lead to sexism. Sexism always works with superficiality. A stylish appearance, taste and beauty do not need to be condemned per se. However, women adopting these features, often run the risk of being looked upon as mere theatrical figures, which could be proof that their main worry is what they represent in the eyes of the viewers.

**Attempts** that approach the theme of feminism with ease, fun and solidarity, that undermine respect and are therefore so strong, can be found predominantly in music today. The song *School of Etiquette* by *Boyskout*, which gave this text its title, was released in 2006 on the compilation *Girl Monster* by *Chicks on Speed*, presenting the history of women in music since the 1970s on three CDs. This history is exciting, it brings together old and new demands and is fresher and more fascinating than most debates that currently deal with feminism in the art sections. Here and in the song *School of Etiquette*, a real attempt is made to break through dominating *etiquettes* by lightness and irony. There is, without doubt a legitimate need to change the status of women.

**I recently** paged again through the *Y* issue of Vera Tollmann and Stephanie Wurster's magazine *Starship*. The foreword states that feminist demands and postulates must be formulated more self-confidently, in a more beautiful, careful, clearer, louder and more aggressive manner so as to confront sexism and everyday struggles. Throughout history of mankind, we find strong women successfully opposing society – and always with enthusiasm, fun and conviction. Why don't we call this diva moments, diva as in the original sense of the word. Divas redefine adventure; they break all customary laws and taboos and leave those who object behind. They break rules and notice how easy it is in fact to do so. But how does the saying go: "No guts, no glory!"<sup>7</sup>

1 'Wir brauchen einen neuen Feminismus', *Die Zeit*, Hamburg, no. 35, 24 August, 2006, p. 49–54 and Susanne Gaschke, 'Es ist die Wirtschaft, meine Damen', *Die Zeit*, no. 38, 14 September, 2006, p. 3.

2 Cf.: Kristin Rowe-Finkbeiner, *The F-Word – Women, Politics and the Future*, Emeryville 2004, p. 32.

3 Here, I would like to thank Ulf Wuggenig who at the beginning of the project referred to the term 'cooling out'.

4 Virginia Valian, *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1999.

5 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Oxford 2001.

6 Margarete Mitscherlich, *Über die Mühsal der Emanzipation*, Frankfurt 1990.

7 I thank Nina Schmidt for her productive collaboration on this text.