

# Cooling Out – What Has Become of Feminism Anyway?

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** When we started with our research, we were uncertain whether the theme of feminism would arouse interest, since it was and still is discredited by many. A year later, the situation had strongly changed; in the media, particularly in the feature sections, the debate intensified and an increasing number of exhibition projects are now dedicated to this theme.

One of the starting points of *Cooling Out – On the Paradox of Feminism* was the question of why a movement – a political, social and also radical movement of the 20th century – which was incredibly successful and initiated so many positive changes, has become so discredited and clichéd. We wondered whether feminism needed to be updated and thus newly defined. In our opinion, many traditional positions are not really relevant anymore. What does it mean, in the year 2006, to speak about feminism? That's what we would like to discuss this evening.

Hanne Loreck, how would you define feminism?

**Hanne Loreck:** From the outset I must confess that I cannot offer a nice definition, because in general a definition attempts to oversimplify a complex content; however this would not do justice to the complexity of feminism. In the end, I would prefer to speak of feminist perspectives or of feminisms, and this is already, in part, a somewhat helpless analogy of what has been discussed and practiced in art as Minimalism. Instead of speaking of feminist perspectives, one could perhaps speak of feminist practices and thereby cover a number of

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different areas. How can art relate to feminism, to feminisms, to feminist perspectives?

I do not fully agree with the initial assumptions or practises, that feminism no longer exists. This claim allows the problem to be viewed from a different perspective. On the other hand, this approach negates those emerging shapes of feminism that today can perhaps no longer be discussed under the umbrella of feminism, but have a lot to do with the – admittedly problematic – concept of gender studies. There is a lot going on, particularly in queer practices and queer studies. It is not enough simply to state that feminism is over and done with, and has to be reanimated.

**Katrin Mayer:** I would like to side with Hanne Loreck. I do not believe that feminism and feminist practices have totally vanished. It seems as if a kind of a movement is developing that takes a look at what still could be accomplished through feminism. For quite a while, the concept was connoted in such a strange way that my generation could no longer relate to it; at best we adhered to a stereotype. The concept appeared to have been replaced by gender studies which, beyond women's perspective, negotiated gender in a completely new manner. Feminism as such seemed to have become stuck in the dualism of male vs female. On the Internet I recently learned that a wave of exhibitions dedicated to feminist art is currently being planned in the United States. Along with the concept of feminism, the theme appears to have become relevant again.

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**René Zechlin:** We are not saying feminism has disappeared, but its concept is connoted in a negative way. When we brought up the subject on various occasions last year, we always met with total rejection or a lack of understanding, as seen in this small anecdote: When I presented the project to my board, it was initially rejected. The answer was: 'Feminism? No way!', voiced by mainly female board members. Instead, the topic of *gender* was proposed. Consequently the issue appeared to be solely the negatively connoted concept and not the theme that was to be addressed. Today, I like to view feminism as a perspective that can be taken as an attitude both women and men can express towards certain issues. Moreover I find it highly important for a man today to study the feminist perspective too, in order to better understand patterns of behaviour and social structures – without, however, to get caught in feelings of guilt. The debates around *gender* or *queer* do not suffice in this respect, for the simple reason that everything has been subsumed to these terms. Questions such as 'What about equal rights? How about equality between men and women in everyday and professional life?' have been completely pushed into the background.

**Sabine Schaschl:** At first we spoke to many female and also male artists, and we repeatedly heard: 'I'm not a feminist, but ...' That is very interesting. The need is acknowledged, but one is reluctant to attach the label of feminism to oneself. During my years as a student, I often discussed womanhood, equal wages, quotas, etc. 10 to 15 years ago, we

Panel discussion at Halle für Kunst on 18 October 2006, with Hanne Loreck, art historian and university professor at the Hochschule für Freie Kunst Hamburg; Berlin / Hamburg; Katrin Mayer, artist, Hamburg; Sabine Schaschl, director and curator Kunsthaus Baselland, Muttentz; René Zechlin, curator Lewis Glucksman Gallery, University College Cork; presented by Bettina Steinbrügge, director and curator Halle für Kunst, Lüneburg



had a climate in which these discussions were commonplace, but we were never inclined to declare ourselves feminists. I thought about this negation for a long time and it soon became clear to me that women run the risk of finding themselves very quickly in the 'feminist corner' and this would have adversely reflected on any of their future activities. Each exhibition, each project, would be rated as organised by a feminist curator. In terms of the future that would have amounted to plain professional suicide. As a woman, it is extremely problematic to identify with this topic. I wonder how one would deal with this today. It is telling enough that this question must still be raised. It is indeed not yet resolved. Something is definitely wrong.

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** We have discussed for quite some time whether today one should regard feminism as an attitude or a movement. Maybe the fact that especially present-day students are turning their backs to traditional feminism is a generational problem. Does this have to do with feminism being perceived more as a movement?

**Hanne Loreck:** I can't answer that. I am now being shoved into the role of the feminist by assumptions and age ...

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** No, I see you as the expert.

**Hanne Loreck:** We won't get very far if we continue to discuss feminism by asking whether it is an attitude or a movement. It could be both, possibly at the same time or alternating or in succession.

I don't believe a definition is of any use at this point. But I certainly think that it is a historical movement. The question in regard to historical movements is always whether one can, should or must regard them completed. Therefore, the more important and more sensible question is if it is correct to attribute this socially and politically extremely explosive movement to a certain period and to say 'that was then'. I don't know if maybe we are still too involved, and what sense, if any, this practice of a historical review would make. Whether it would again offer a possibility to reactivate something, or whether feminism should be perceived as a self-contained system. Instead, I would prefer to point out the key figures. Wouldn't it be more interesting to go deeper into the question of art? This would lead to two views.

On the one hand, the question ought to be raised as to whether there is something like feminism in art, and on the other hand, to ask what is conveyed through art, so to speak. Do contents exist that become themes or maybe also forms of art and thus could these contents be conveyed through art? In a similar way in which politics transport contents? How does that function in art? My suggestion is to discuss this in less general terms and refer more to art.

**René Zechlin:** In the course of the project, we decided not to show works that represent feminism in art, but to direct the debate towards what can be shown through art in terms of feminism. We therefore omitted many works based on art-historical aspects of feminist practice. In the entire exhibition,

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as well as in the ones in Muttentz/Basel and Cork, there are no direct links to classic feminist art from the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, we made a completely new start. We deliberately selected works revealing the complexity of the theme, rather than coming up with clear statements, accusations or demands. Based on such an exhibition, it is therefore difficult to discuss whether there are feminisms and to what extent they exist in contemporary art.

**Sabine Schaschl:** Our exhibitions are pretty much geared towards content. At the opening of the show at Kunsthhaus Baselland, when we offered a guided tour to the press, we noticed that the feminist aspects came on the fore only on a second or third viewing. That came as a big surprise to those who expected to see traditional familiar feminist aspects. The exhibitions don't offer that. However, once you delve into the works, questions open up that ultimately lead to feminist discourses. There are many and varied perspectives on feminism in terms of both content and form.

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** Katrin, you have been dedicated to the theme of feminism for quite some time. Can you tell us something about the artistic view of feminism? How do you deal with the theme on a visual level?

**Katrin Mayer:** I am not an artist who is exclusively dedicated to feminist issues. But the theme did emerge in several works. My work usually focuses on social topics as well as the phenomena of marginalization. The *shooting actions* on

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the posters serve (as with Niki de Saint-Phalle) to rebuff the art business and the male dominated tradition of painting. But that's just one example in which I connected marginalized images and figures with each other. The moment of connection is motivated through structures, i.e. the actions needn't necessarily be motivated in a feminist manner. I see a connection between feminist thought and modes of behaviour in science, which are part of a post-colonial discourse and include categories such as *class* and *race*. In my case, the issue is indeed *gender studies*, approaches linked in thought. What I also find interesting is the extent to which feminism can be an attitude, and influence all these modes of thought.

**Hanne Loreck:** I cannot separate content and form in this debate. I would like to see them dealt with together. Conceptual art, in particular, offers incredible structural possibilities. Many of the earlier feminist artists were not able to include research in their work to the degree possible today. What I find interesting in this exhibition is that the feminist potential is connected to Conceptual art in terms of vocabulary and form. Within the context of feminist perspectives, one shouldn't forget that Conceptual art, today, still does not enjoy the status of painting. Conceptual art is met with resistance and is derisively called political art. It continues to be distinguished from an art that emerges out of itself.

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** We were often criticised for the fact that the shows



are not corporeal enough. The dominating discourse seems to mistake feminism for body art. Is that true?

**René Zechlin:** No. One cannot view feminist art and disregard the historical perspective. Art as well as the language of art have undergone a complete change. The forms of both art and feminism must position themselves anew. The only question is, how?

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** The term *cooling out* implies an illusion of equal opportunities in terms of the professional possibilities of female academics. Statistically, only a few women are successful. Those who do not climb the career ladder are told that it is their own fault, since they had all opportunities. Can new feminist issues be derived from this?

**Hanne Loreck:** The discrepancy between the number of admitted female art students and the possibilities in the field is huge in view of the market structures. In my practice as a lecturer in art studies and art theory, I find it important to present female artists as models at the university. Most invitations and guest presentations concern men, and these must be countered. As much of a nonsense this statistics may appear, this imbalance needs to be worked on.

**Sabine Schaschl:** Are we now talking about quotas? One can indeed see that men define the art market. Only a few successful women appear in the relevant rankings. Could quotas create a balance?

**René Zechlin:** Susanne Gaschke, editor with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, points out that the quota system in politics was in fact successful. However, I don't know if a quota system in art would change anything substantially. It is now crucial to pursue the current discussion in various ways. Why is there no true equality? What are the essential issues? It is not about a simple yes or no. It is important to raise people's awareness and to question individual mechanisms. I am not aware of many mechanisms and neither are the general public, I believe.

**Hanne Loreck:** I don't think a quota system is of any real use. We should create awareness in regard to thought and language, in the way we are familiar with from gender mainstreaming. The current, alarmingly technocratic language serves as an instrument to lift aspects of quota, etc. to the formal, institutional level. If this is supposed to represent the relevant set of rules, I notice that I definitely want to build up resistance.

**Sabine Schaschl:** In the discussions on the exhibitions, talk in the context of the term *cooling out* was always about postulating a cooling down and about a new momentum that could arise for this reason. If the exhibition had been given a much more affirmative title, it would not have caused such a stir. Once one declares a movement to be over and done with, revival is bound to be close. The most wonderful shift came from a radio reporter who constantly speculated about the concept of cool.

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**Katrin Mayer:** What kind of a revival are we faced with right now? It is currently quite widespread to reactivate trends – in fashion, in society and in art. Moreover, the ideal of fashion is feminine, scanty and sexy.

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** I find the return to the 1950s to be much more interesting. The woman has returned to house and home. This backlash is presently being addressed in politics as well. And thinking about this leads me to how the theme is exploited in the media. I have the impression that the media function as a compensatory playground or a virtual platform, in other words, discussions are led for the sake of the discussion. And then all are happy to have talked it through again – no need to take the subject up for the next few years.

**René Zechlin:** It's better a topic is taken up in the media than not being addressed at all. The discussion can continue, in whatever frame.

**Sabine Schaschl:** I noticed that the discussions are featured in daily newspapers, but not in women's magazines. As for the potential scope, that's a shame. Feminism has achieved a lot, but how do things progress from here? Feminism ought to be discussed by everyone, men and women alike. I think a different platform is needed, exhibitions and art environments are too elitist.

**Member of the audience:** Let me briefly talk about the flyer. It doesn't invite people who read women's

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magazines at the hairdresser's, it addresses intellectuals. How would unsophisticated persons relate to gender? How do the women we see today in for instance the pedestrian zones, with a husband, a pram and so on, recognize that they need to organize their lives by themselves? They cannot relate at all to the gender concept.

**Hanne Loreck:** The argument doesn't work. Those with whom the theme is concerned are always the others. First of all, there are enough people who can relate to it, who have controversial and/or deviating ideas. Why doesn't one make use of an existing platform in the first place without wishing for another one immediately? I believe the *woman in the street* is a popular myth and therefore, again, also political. Maybe we don't require this myth at all to engage in or refrain from certain discussions.

**Sabine Schaschl:** I find it important to address the *woman in the street*. There is a mother behind every boy, and if he is taught to refrain from derogative jokes about women, then a lot is already achieved. It needn't start with gender; there are also other channels that can be developed.

**René Zechlin:** Indeed, my concern is also this *woman in the street*. One problem is that feminism or gender studies, as an academic field, have become detached from the reality of everyday life. I view this panel as a possibility to root the debate. From a scientific point of view, this panel lacks expertise, because it



does not deal with details. But the media we make use of can transport complex contents and examine issues on a broader basis.

**Member of the audience:** That entirely depends on one's awareness. Even in elitist groups of society, there is often no awareness of the individual's socialisation. Male and female role patterns are perceived as normal and then adopted. All fields need to work together. Art, culture, politics and all those dealing with these concepts must work together and do educational ground work.

**Member of the audience:** Talk has been of awareness, of the way we perceive ourselves; of the encounter with feminism in art and how it can be translated. What would be interesting, especially in such intellectual context, is how feminism actually evolves out of the structures of society. We are not innate feminist, however (around 1968) structures in society triggered the idea of self-realisation which soon became a reality. Is feminism in the West really feminism, and isn't it quite different in the East, in the former communist states? Haven't many of the demands formulated in the West been realised in the East?

**Hanne Loreck:** If one takes a look at the large feminist exhibition projects currently planned in the United States, one notices that many of the participating female artists are unknown. With regard to the political statement, I find it interesting that the curators turn to other places to revive the feminist project. The

whole exercise is then called *global feminism* and confirms: 'It still exists!' That is now only a partial answer, but the other point would be to rethink things in terms of *feminisms*. Rethinking insofar as this feminism, of which one believes that it can be historically defined through certain protagonists or theories, possibly existed as a practice or theory in other places. My assumption is that it was only termed differently.

**Member of the audience:** For me, feminism has always been pragmatic and not theoretical. And I also presume that, here, a totally different idea and range of feminism exists, to which I cannot relate. My decision to come here was based on the decision of the curators to pursue the *Cooling Out* project in a feminist perspective as one that has become incomprehensible to me. I am a member of a women's association where we have serious disagreements on the issue of feminism, a fight striking below the belt, which in my mind is a conflict between the generations. But it is really not a conflict between the generations, and I am very thankful for the view that was given here: that is to look at the extent to which modern capitalism has shaped the structures. The current conditions at the workplace greatly influence one's awareness.

**Bettina Steinbrügge:** I agree. The assertion of feminist themes is first of all a political issue. If equal rights were backed by politics, a whole lot more would have been achieved by now. To me, it appears, however, that for various socio-economic reasons this is not desired.

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**René Zechlin:** I am grateful that the topic of capitalist structures has been mentioned here after all. In the end, all the discussions about change of structures, etc. are eventually brought down by lack of economic will. To realise flexible family planning also fails when the desire of both women and men to care for their children jeopardises their career. But why? This has been neglected in the discussion until now, yet it is critical.

**Member of the audience:** When I look at the wall picture of the 3 Hamburger Frauen, I wonder what its adequate interpretation could be. Why do women present themselves in such a way?

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**René Zechlin:** The picture's intention is to provoke precisely that question. How do I present myself nowadays? Is there a *correct* form in visual or linguistic terms? The artists integrate themselves in their works, take on different roles and combine them with all kinds of elements, which also express personal interests. It does not represent a truth and is thus a pretty good mirror of our times. One can take on different roles, present oneself in different ways and play with these roles. This is where the complexity arises that makes it difficult for a movement like feminism to still play a role in today's predominating structures.

**Ergül Cengiz (3 Hamburger Frauen):** From our point of view, as artists working in a feminist way, it is important to perform as a group.

That goes beyond limits and shows how art can also be produced. What feminism often lacks is solidarity among women, since hierarchies are upheld. And that is precisely where we set an example.