

The background features a series of diagonal stripes in shades of blue and pink, creating a modern, abstract design. The stripes are of varying widths and are set against a solid pink background on the right side.

**#FEMINISM?**  
**Activism and**  
**Agitation**  
**in the**  
**Digital Age**

**Natalie Frank**

*Story of O*, exhibition installation at  
Half Gallery, New York, April 2018  
Wallpaper collaboration:  
Natalie Frank x Flavor Paper

“I draw and paint about the intersection of women’s desire, sexuality, and the violence that surrounds the body through narratives based on literature. I have worked with unsanitized fairy tales, which all began as women’s oral tales. *Story of O*—an erotic novel that shocked and aroused millions—was published in 1954 under the pseudonym Pauline Réage; many suspected the book, with its frank descriptions of bondage and desire, must have secretly been written by a man. This book, the first written by a woman about domination, submission, and sexual desire of women, is a contemporary fairy tale. The author, the French intellectual Dominique Aury (born Anne Desclos, 1908–1998) revealed her identity in 2004, in an interview at the age of 86. Upon reading *O*, Camus decried that a woman could not have written it. Women, he said, did not possess erotic imaginations—nor were they capable of such immorality. In my work, I set out to prove the opposite.” —Natalie Frank



# Considering a New Feminism

Kimberly Drew

<sup>1</sup> Lucille Clifton, interviewed by Hilary Holladay, “She Could Tell You Stories,” Poetry Foundation, April 11, 1998, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68875/she-could-tell-you-stories>.

*I don’t write out of what I know; I write out of what I wonder.* —Lucille Clifton

With the advent and acceleration of social media, we have stumbled headstrong into a new, hyperconnected era of #feminism and #feminist thought. As a writer, feminist, and frequent user of social media, I wonder where we are headed as we embark on a new wave of feminism. I wonder how algorithmic groupthink may help or hurt us. I wonder what we have learned from earlier generations and what we can do to avoid some of the same mistakes.

Today’s internet provides an increasing number of opportunities for traditionally ignored, underserved, or otherwise discarded groups to take control of their narratives and, by extension, over their own lives. With respect to feminist groupthink, the first-person teachings of #feminists who, like me, use their social media platforms to #author their own #feministutopias infuse current feminist pedagogy. With each scroll or upload, social media-era feminists employ #selfies, #viral quotes, screenshots, and other imagery to map a #feministfuture. In many ways, we are seeing the manifestations of earlier generations’ wildest dreams—but we are still far away from an egalitarian utopia.

It is almost impossible to think about what it means to be a woman in the United States in 2020 without considering how much changed on November 8, 2016. I focus especially on that morning—before the election results rolled in and before life, as I had known it, would completely change. On that Tuesday morning, there was a weighted feeling of hope that it might be possible to elect Hillary Clinton; if that had happened, a veiled sense of American idealism and progressivism might have lived on, almost as if through osmosis, without contest. Racism and sexism might have been a thing of the past.

That morning, on social media, women from near and far documented their journeys to the suffragist Susan B. Anthony’s funeral plot in Rochester, New York. They paid their respects (and undoubtedly humble-bragged to their online constituencies) by placing “I Voted” stickers on the tombstone. While there is great pride in exercising our right to vote, a long and hard-earned journey, one of the significant benefits of being a feminist in the age of the internet is having more access to broader portraits of our

heroes and heroines. In a sanitized history, it seems fair to celebrate Anthony's victories; at a deeper glance, however, it's impossible to ignore that she said, "I will cut off this right arm of mine before I will ever work or demand the ballot for the Negro and not the woman." If we've learned anything from the three waves of feminism, it's that we have not figured it all out.

I wanted to keep this sentiment upmost in my mind before heading to a panel on feminism and social media at the Tang Teaching Museum. I remembered how betrayed I felt that morning in November 2016, not only because of my own hesitations about Hillary Clinton but also because it reminded me to keep a critical mind in relation to defining feminism—a concept and identity that was relatively new for me.

Feminism as a concept was delivered to me through the lens of academia. As an undergraduate at Smith College, I studied with Paula Giddings, the premier Ida B. Wells scholar and a catalyst within the Black feminist movement. I enrolled in her Black Feminism course because it met my requirements and fit neatly into my schedule—not because I considered myself a feminist.

Black Feminism, where we learned about Black women from Reconstruction to the war on drugs, was the only seminar where those working in gender studies would find themselves in the same classroom as those working in Africana studies. There was a palpable tension in class as Africana studies students, usually Black, spoke from their personal experience and gender studies students, usually non-Black, spoke from their interpretations of our coursework. The students had no choice but to engage with a microcommunity generated by what seemed to be a similar interest in a singular subject. It was in that classroom that I cemented my understanding that sharing a gender does not guarantee that any two people will align ideologically. I also learned the incredible history of Black feminists and acquired a copy of the anthology *Words of Fire*, a collection of texts that changed who I knew myself to be as a Black woman and newly minted feminist.<sup>2</sup>

During the conversation at the Tang, which also included Amy Richards and Natalie Frank, we discovered a chasm—an unsurprising one—between how we define feminism for ourselves and how we utilize feminist thought or create new feminist realities for those in our

networks. As organizers, practitioners, and artists, we define our own identities from different vantage points. I initially found this possibility daunting, but in practice, it was refreshing to revel in the multiplicity of what being a feminist means today. It is so much deeper than a single definition. Feminism as a concept has matured and now serves many more of us than it did in the past.

In the 2018 Netflix documentary *Feminists: What Were They Thinking?*, filmmaker Johanna Demetrakas draws ties between the feminist movement of the 1970s and the women who were depicted in or inspired by the 1977 book *Emergence*, a volume of photographs by the lesbian artist Cynthia MacAdams. The book arrived at a critical time in the women's movement: just three years after it became legal for women to open their own line of credit and about a year before it became illegal to fire a woman because of pregnancy. MacAdams captured the women of this era, emphasizing what she felt was their distinct look.

In the introduction to *Emergence*, Kate Millett, MacAdams's partner and the author of *Sexual Politics*, wrote, "They're a new kind of woman. You haven't seen them before. Neither have I. At least not in pictures. A new breed of us just coming into being, never recorded until now, never noticed, given a name, allied into a continuity... the lot of them. They with the new thing in their eyes. Looking back at you. And beyond."<sup>3</sup> In the book, feminists of the day posed nude, behind cameras, in front of mirrors—all representing a new dawn for women. Photography, a medium that has been used for good and evil in somewhat equal measure, is used to invite us into the psyche of the time. Forty years later, Demetrakas's film deepened our understanding of the story behind each image.

Watching the documentary, I found immediate parallels between what MacAdams accomplished in *Emergence* and what many emerging feminist artists are accomplishing today. I thought especially of what Petra Collins and Toyin Ojih Odutola have added to the feminist canon. Their portraits of women are characterized by the piercing gaze and unwavering power of their subjects. Then and now, feminists utilize media to tell our stories for ourselves and to define a self-possession that has often been denied to us. It is this media-making that illustrates our stories and helps shape our collective understanding of the era.

A cataclysmic shift in how activism was viewed in the public eye and in the media occurred shortly after the 2016 election. In coastal cities in the United States, there was an urgency to take to the streets and make our voices heard. We saw the rise of the new *Teen Vogue*, and, during the Women's March of 2017, pink pussy hats and signs made for the revolution were plastered all over Instagram. The energy and acceptance of this era of women's rights was an unprecedented force. It was both amazing and deeply saddening to see generations of women marching arm in arm and demanding equality. Today, things are quite different.

To illustrate this contrast, I think of the 2018 book *Together We Rise: Behind the Scenes at the Protest Heard around the World*, published a year after the Women's March. *Together We Rise* is very different from a book like *Emergence*. While *Emergence* was panned by critics in the late 1970s, *Together We Rise* (and other similar books) is now heralded. The roles of women in media have shifted considerably. Women are now at the helm of mainstream publications, in political office, and using the power of social media to take more control. It may be cheesy, but the old adage almost demands to return: "With great power comes great responsibility." What is our fight now, and how do we make it an inclusive one for women globally?

Perhaps the most incredible gift of being a feminist today is awareness. We know that we're a part of a larger history. We know that our fight is a legitimate one. And hopefully, we know that we are responsible for making the world a better place for future generations. With this in mind, I am left wondering what the fruits of this next era will be. I watched online as nearly five million women in Kerala, India's southern peninsula, locked arms to demand equality. But I have also watched as women have excluded trans women from notions of feminism time and time again. I wonder, How will we take charge of this triumphant moment? How will we document ourselves? Most important, how will we all hold ourselves accountable? ▲

# Kimberly Drew

writer

# Natalie Frank

artist

# Amy Richards

producer

**Isolde Brielmaier** This conversation explores feminism. Let's kick things off by defining some terms—especially fourth-wave feminism and #feminism—and look specifically at the implications of technology for these movements.

**Natalie, you've been continuously dealing with feminism, sexuality, and representation, and you consistently engage your viewers with various feminist ideologies and thought. Can you start by telling us about your art practice?**

**Natalie Frank** My work focuses on women, the body, sexuality, violence, and narrative. In the past five years, I've started to look at unsanitized fairy tales, primarily with drawing. Right now, I'm working on a book of Madame d'Aulnoy, who was the first feminist literary fairy teller, from the 1690s. Because she's a woman, her work has been somewhat overlooked: never illustrated or collected in full. She wrote early versions of many of the stories we know, such as "Cinderella" and "The Beauty and the Beast," though we might not recognize hers; our versions have been Disney-fied.

What's drawn me to these fairy tales has been the fact that they all began as women's oral tales, which I think a lot of people don't know. Some of them are protofeminist; they represent life at the time for women, whether it's the nineteenth-century tales by the Brothers Grimm or Madame d'Aulnoy's seventeenth-century stories. It was interesting to discover that fairy tales and literature were a place that women, when they were censored in everyday life by the church or the state, could express their fears and anxieties and desires.

**IB** **Kimberly, you occupy several spaces, both public and private, overseeing the Metropolitan Museum of Art's social media, and you have an influential Instagram account of your own: @museummammy. Could you talk about what you're working on?**

**Kimberly Drew** I have a book called *Black Futures* that I'm working on with Jenna Wortham, who's an amazing writer at the *New York Times*. For this book, we are creating an anthology that looks at Black cultural production since the advent of social media. And in the process of bookmaking, I've taken on fifteen other projects, which include moonlighting as a journalist and doing panel talks every chance I get.

Within my work at the Met, one of the creative challenges that I've taken on is how to use social media as a vehicle for access and accessibility. I'm thinking about how a platform like Facebook Live could be a useful platform for people who are hearing impaired. Or, for example, if you close your eyes and think about the Met, most people think of the steps. How can we change the entry point of the museum from being something that's literally inaccessible into something that people feel they have access to and then, much more, feel they have ownership over?

**IB** **Amy, in the 1990s, you cofounded the Third Wave Foundation. It was a godsend for so many young women at the time, because we felt disconnected from the feminist and women's movements of our mothers or grandmothers. That's not to disregard those movements, but it didn't feel as if there was a space for something that was a bit broader, a bit**



**more diverse. You had this incredible idea to cofound the foundation. And now you're writing and producing.**

**Amy Richards** Third Wave started as a cross-country voter registration drive. That work took us out into the community and showed me the real obstacles to voter participation and an engaged citizenship. I learned a very valuable lesson on that trip: I thought I was doing it for people who didn't have ready access to the system, but I realized that if I was living in a democracy that was not fulfilling its promise, that that was doing me a disservice. It was an early and very important shift. I went from being out in the community, talking to young activists, to founding this organization, funding projects that young people were starting, to writing books and spending a lot of time on college campuses to producing documentaries.

One of the most satisfying things I do is run Feminist Camp, which hosts immersive experiences in feminism. When I was spending time on college campuses, I realized that what was more readily accessible to a campus environment, in terms of studying feminism, was already outdated and limited because of whose voices were accessible to a classroom. And it became a much more generic interpretation, not bad or good, just limited, and so I wanted to create an experience that took people, like I did on Freedom Summer, to a community of feminism to show rather than to tell what feminism looks like.

Feminist Camp happens multiple times a year, in multiple places, but our signature program is in New York with days featuring different themes. For instance, on a justice day, you might start in the courtroom of a judge who's working around sex trafficking. I watch students have strong opinions about the police officers who are in the courtroom. And within a short amount of time, they realize that the police officers are often there to defend the women because they don't want the women to be criminalized for something they've been involved in. And we might go from there to a meeting with sex workers who have a very different experience, and then we might go to a group like Equality Now, who are looking at this topic globally. It's meant to show the depth of what feminism means.

**IB** **How do you each define feminism, or a range of feminisms?**

**AR** The definition has evolved for me. Even being able to take ownership over that word was hard for me because it felt like it was locked in a box and I needed certain clues to get into the box or accomplish certain tasks. I started defining it as the dictionary does, which is the movement for full social and political equality for women, but that means something and at the same time it means nothing. I've realized, more recently, that feminism to me is about a recognition that we are intentionally meant to be divided on the things that make us different, and there's a desire to keep us from unifying. And that's intentional because we don't all have the *same* thing that makes us different but we all have *something* that makes us different.

To realize that difference as a strength and not as a deficiency would be a powerful moment. So, feminism to me is the recognition that those

are moments of value. Forces are trying to keep us divided, and feminism is the movement to try to bring us together even with those differences.

**KD** I grapple with feminism all the time because I think, in any circumstance, the invisible labels set upon us can be difficult to navigate. I also think feminism is a flawed concept because it's about equality, and I feel like equality is not imaginative. I think so much about the radical possibility of what women can do, and that's largely because I went to a women's college that was very rah-rah woman all the time.

So when I think about feminism or women-specific spaces, I think about it as a space for empowerment, but at the same time, I'm going through this deep thought process about what gender even means and whether it's relevant or important. If I'm thinking about feminism retrospectively, it's a useful label. But when I think about future forward, I wonder if feminism has a place in the future, considering the ways in which we're conceptualizing around larger issues that feminism in many ways tackles but then sometimes shies away from historically, too. So it's a word and label. It's useful and not useful, and it's one that I'm happy to continue to interrogate.

**IB** **Continual interrogation is important. There's been a lot of critique over the idea that the term is structured around a heteronormative notion of gender and what it means to be a woman within a strict binary. If we're talking about intersectionality and being forward-thinking, to your point, Kimberly, we may need new terms. We may need to add different terms, or maybe we don't need terms at all.**

**NF** For me, feminism has always been a subset of humanism. It's about respecting individuals' ability to express themselves and their own narratives. I've always made work about that, whether it's going into dungeons in New York and photographing dominatrixes or bringing back seventeenth-century women who have been overlooked, who are fairy tellers and historians. I was drawn into art by artists who use personal narrative and make it political. It was never just about women for me.

I grew up in the repressive South. I think I was fifteen when they called me a pornographer and tried to kick me out of high school for drawing nude figures. So I was very aware that there were outdated ideas of who has access and who doesn't. I remember coming across Linda Nochlin's work for the first time: that really ignited for me these ideas of who has access, who is allowed to speak, and how that manifests.

**IB** **What are some of the key challenges you feel we're confronting right now with feminism? And what strategies are we using? Are there new strategies because of the digital platform?**

**AR** I would say the fourth wave of feminism, happening now, is about imagining a way forward. The first wave was about the right to citizenship, just to be counted as a citizen in the United States. The next wave was about legal equality. And I always thought the third wave was about changing behavior. Rape was made illegal in the second wave, but it still

happened. How do you change behavior to combat something that the law didn't exclusively take care of? If there's a fourth wave, it's about going beyond confronting a system to creating a system. That's why I agree with you, Kimberly, that the equality frame doesn't work. There are a bunch of equality campaigns right now: 50/50 by 2020, for example. It doesn't work because what we're going to do is rush to fill placements and we're just going to put people into systems that are oppressive. It's not going to change culture.

**KD** Regarding the issues to be tackled—I think we're in this moment where there's an issue everywhere we look. They change every day. I live in Brooklyn, and I take the subway to work every day, and there was this amazing sticker project that showed where Rikers was on the subway map. There are so many systems that are oppressive that we don't even acknowledge or see. The thing, for me, that's really important is digital technologies—one of the strategies that's been amazing and helpful is just acknowledging the issues.

Some people are quick to critique the way that digital technology and activism intersect—as if knowledge and awareness aren't forms of activism. When I think about the future of feminism, it's about acknowledging how many things are wrong. If there's anything that ties together the last year, it is that there has been a lot that we've been quiet on and now people are having this moment of awakening. But at the same time, there's so much that I'm deeply frustrated by. Even just thinking about the Harriet Tubman pussy hat thing...

On January 20, there was a Women's March, and someone knit a pussy hat for the Harriet Tubman Memorial in Harlem. I don't know how they got it up there, but I can only imagine that someone climbed up Harriet Tubman and put the hat on her. That image disturbs me so deeply and makes me so sad. It very much echoes the voting stickers that people applied to Susan B. Anthony's tombstone, despite the fact that Susan B. Anthony was a wild racist. There are these ways in which we are not properly learning from the past, and in many ways, digital technology allows us to not necessarily do a revisionist look at everything but just to get real.

People talk about social media as this vacuum that accelerates issues. But because we're taking in so much, it slows us down to a certain degree, and perhaps that slowing down is what can, if there is a fourth wave, be a part of where we actually just stop and say, "Okay, is there a group that's doing this work that I want to be doing? Is there someone I could be a thought partner with where I don't have to go and be public immediately about the thing I want but actually have space for critical dialogue and interiority, because it's not about grand statements?" It's not about having the best sign at the protest, because being at the protest can be dangerous. Do you have people you can call if you get arrested? These things are slow work and, I hope, for the fourth wave, that at least we're being more critical.

**IB** **If we think about social media in terms of access, we're talking about a transnational platform, one that has the potential to cross borders and reach a broad range of people.**

**NF** For me, through working with books and these oral tales, I've started to think about using social media as a means of access, as a means to have a direct voice into a large and instant community, and I've started writing for art publications. I wrote an opinion piece for *ARTnews* when the Harvey Weinstein scandal was breaking about my ten years of experiencing sexual harassment. It was the first time I wrote something personal and put it immediately into the public.

It was called "For Women Artists, the Art World Can Be a Minefield." I was interested in the real-world effects a personal essay could have. There were probably a dozen women who contacted me after I wrote this piece. For some, it was the first time they recognized or verbalized their own situations, and it opened up a dialogue. Real change happened afterward—within days. It was staggering to see that speaking out via personal essay could have a real-time effect.

**IB** **Did you give a lot of thought to the repercussions? Many women contend with what calling out or naming someone means for their livelihood, their careers.**

**NF** I did. I really thought about it. There's a necessity for nuance: what constitutes good sex, bad sex, harassment, rape, legality, illegality. But when you start to lob accusations, it's important to take seriously what the effects can be and to have certainty.

**AR** There was an important piece in the *Times* yesterday about the first US gymnast to report sex abuse in USA Gymnastics and other programs. She said that the last year has been hell because of the number of people trying to take down her story. I have spoken publicly about abortion and sexual assault, and you can have 90 percent hostility, but then 10 percent of people saying thank you.

**NF** It's worth it.

**AR** Totally worth it.

There's an initiative in New York City right now to have the first sculpture of real women in Central Park—to honor Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. I have been against this statue. If we're going to have our first testament to real women, it can't be to white women. The response I got from the women who are leading this campaign, well-respected women, was "Don't worry; we're going to put other women's names at the bottom of the sculpture, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth." I said, "That's not acceptable." The whole thing is terrible, and I say this because we now know better. We can't write a narrative that is not an attempt at a more accurate narrative. I won't feel good if we look back and I did not speak out against that. There are some things we all have to speak out against.

**KD** One of the things about this moment that I love—because I love messiness—is that we're in a moment of crisis. We're all crisis managing. For me personally, I have a history of sexual violence in my life, and trying to navigate that every day, when every day there's a story, every day there's



someone who's doubting someone...I live on the internet, that's my job. I can't *not* look at Twitter; I can't unplug. Crisis management is something that can be difficult to manage. You get into this fight or flight response mode. We're all called to this moment of responsibility and really understanding that our silence is complicity. That's where feminism is right now, at least to me.

**IB** You each mentioned the word *responsibility*, and this dovetails with a slightly overused word, *intersectionality*. I had a conversation yesterday with a museum colleague who said that she felt a lot of women of color were very critical of “today’s feminism” and of white women because they feel that many white women are able to engage with the issue of gender only as it affected them. This is something that women of color don’t have a choice in: you’re not Black or a woman, you’re a Black woman, and there are a multitude of issues that affect you.

However we see ourselves, what is our responsibility to engage with women of different races or constructed social categories of difference? What about issues relating to members of the LGBTQIA+ community? While I may not be of that community, I see those issues as integral to my existence in this world. What is our responsibility for engaging, for calling out, for being allies to things, people, communities that are outside of how we see ourselves?

**AR** When I’m telling the story of feminism to different audiences, I have to work hard because there are names and resources that are more available to me than other names or resources, which is contributing to this problem. Barbara Smith started Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, and that was the most poignant press, and that gave voice to women who didn’t have voice. And Byllye Avery was doing health care not just for Black women but for all women. But I have to remember to write into the narrative people who have been excluded.

When I’m at my Feminist Camp, it’s most likely a trans-identified person who says, “Say your pronouns, say your pronouns,” and who offers their pronouns up more readily than others. At the same time, I run Feminist Camps in Zambia and we’ll have these exercises with schoolgirls there and we’ll talk about gender roles and sex roles. In Zambia, I’m mostly around people who are not white, adding another element of realizing that race and gender are fabrications. When we go back in time, race and gender were creations that were meant to divide us.

**KD** When I was thinking about having this conversation, I was also thinking about why I love art: it’s because art is so much a record of a time. Art is something that we all, in some way, participate in because we are alive in a moment. We all bear witness to something, and then some people are courageous enough to make things that respond to those moments.

**NF** Asking questions and listening to the answer is a big thing. Then if you see something that’s not right, you speak out about it. You write about it. You talk about it. You correct someone. You paint about it. I feel an urgency now, which I had not felt before Trump was elected, to speak out about things that I feel and see every day. It’s an onslaught. Perhaps that’s

the only positive thing that’s come out of this administration: that we feel that push to speak out and to correct.

**AR** I think of the metaphor of the stairs that Kimberly was talking about at the Met, because that is an intimidating space. When I run the Feminist Camps, I mentally note which demographic will ask me for a recommendation, or ask me for a connection, or ask for the internship. I identify the privileged group of people, and I prove myself right every single time. I have to be intentional about finding the silent people and saying, “I want to introduce you to somebody.” And then do that.

A lot of campers want to go into the publishing industry, which is incredibly elitist and white. They recognize this as a limitation, and so when I meet with editors, I say, “If you want to change what books you’re producing, you have to change who the editors are.” As much as it’s great to have six million out there marching, the change happens one by one, by means of the invitation or introduction to somebody new.

**IB** How do you see digital space allowing us to bring more people to the table so that we’re not just preaching to the choir?

**KD** I think the most important thing that I do, as a social media manager for an institution like the Met, is to give people a vocabulary. Oftentimes, a huge barrier to access in museums is that people don’t feel like they know what’s inside. If I say, “Here are five works of art from these five different countries,” at least you know them. Then perhaps there’s a familiarity and maybe you want to go see them—it’s an opportunity for people to be able to build their own art historical relationships. Whether they like something or not, they know that it’s a thing they can visit. I am twenty-seven and the Met is a hundred and fifty. And it contains five thousand years of art.

Social media, at its very best, is an opportunity for gaining information. Sometimes that information can be emotional, and sometimes it is matter of fact. I’m trying to give people something that they can take away.

**Audience** Each of you mentioned a balance between being in a position of privilege as well as sometimes being in a minority or underrepresented group. You also talked about the importance of speaking out. How do you balance the responsibility for speaking with the responsibility to allow for other unrepresented voices?

**NF** I’ve been thinking about this a lot recently. I was meant to have a show in about two months with fifteen drawings based on the erotic book *Story of O*. The book is an icon of sex-positive feminism. The woman dealer called me up and said, “In this climate of sexual harassment, I will not show your work.” And I thought, Wow. This is something I want to speak out about for myself and also for others. I’ve come to a few ideas about how to speak about this experience. One is in the press; another is through a publication that will accompany the exhibition, which will now take place elsewhere and which will talk about the history of the work, the history of the book, why the book is important, what sex-positive feminism is, and what feminism is. So these real-world events have given

me an access point to speak out loudly, either through my work or around my work, about things I care about deeply.

**KD** Speaking out means submitting to journals and speaking at conferences, if that's available to you, or organizing a conference if you work for an institution that will support such ventures. There is a keen responsibility because we are in a moment when speaking on behalf of others is something you can benefit from. So when I think about feminism as a concept, or how our feminism and our activism can be sold in this moment, it's also important to think about generosity, that when you're doing something for someone else, there isn't an immediate return.

That gesture and that understanding should come from a pure place. Ego can be so dangerous. I have a large following on social media, not just through the Met, and I can shine light on things, but sometimes people don't want light to shine. We have to think critically about what our good gestures are. I'm sure it was a well-intentioned person who put the pussy hat on the Harriet Tubman statue. But there's something important about doing gestures more slowly and being responsive in the ways in which we're showing up or speaking out.

**AR** Last year, in the weeks after the election, I was an organizer for an Annie Leibovitz exhibit at Bayview Correctional Facility, a former women's correctional facility in New York. Annie wanted an unusual space, and I suggested the facility. But being there after the election, with many women who had been in that space when it was a prison, I heard a lot of talk about how they couldn't speak out. They couldn't risk being arrested. They couldn't risk having a spotlight on them, but their issues needed a spotlight more than ever.

It was a nice reminder to ask that community, who can't speak as readily, how I might be able to leverage my privilege or my power for their community. That's a muscle that you have to practice all the time, because we can get lazy about it. You always have to remind yourself to ask, How do I step outside of my comfort zone? Bryan Stevenson, who wrote the book *Just Mercy*, says that as a culture we have become conditioned to stay away from communities that feel dangerous or marginalized or different. In fact, if we want to be part of disrupting society and systems, we have to go to those places.

I live near tons of public housing in New York. What are you taught to do around those places? To circumvent, to go around. What if, instead, I walk through and actually see what it means to live on this block that we avoid. It is important to go toward the things that you care about and see which populations can't speak up.

**IB** **We can make statements. We can call out. But asking questions is also important. When something is said that I find offensive, I take a deep breath and I ask a question, like, "Wow, that kind of rubs me the wrong way. Where are you getting that information? Have you had that experience before?" It's a nice way to throw the ball back to somebody, and then just sit and let people chew on the issue without calling them out. Sometimes a simple question makes people reflect.**

**Audience** I find that I get easily overwhelmed by all the images—especially the negative images—that we subconsciously take into our bodies. How do you take a step back and find your inner peace again when you are constantly battling these big, overwhelming issues? How can you step forward feeling refreshed and able?

**NF** I've been thinking about reading things in the press that are erroneous and to the detriment of people doing meaningful work. I find value in speaking out, writing, to set the record straight. I'm a member of the Council for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and I care deeply about the work they're doing. I kept seeing articles implicating the founder of the Center for Feminist Art, Elizabeth Sackler, because of the role of a portion of the Sackler family in the opioid crisis.

It was a matter of activists and journalists not getting the facts right, and then certain claims getting repeated over Twitter and Instagram and then going into the mainstream press from one article to another with seemingly no fact-checking, and it really upset me. So I sat down and wrote an op-ed for Artnet that showed that Elizabeth's side of the Sackler family was completely different from the side of the family that engaged in the opioid crisis. I care about her and the institution she built—the only feminist art center in the world shouldn't be clouded by sloppy lies in the press or by someone else's agenda.

And so, it's self-care and attention to people and institutions that you care about. I'm not going to stop making sex-positive work because someone tells me that she's not going to show it. Or stay silent when I can add my voice.

Building a community where you have each other's backs, especially women with other women, is another positive practice. And if there are inaccuracies being reported and repeated, it feels responsible to speak up and support the people in your community.

**AR** Action is my self-care. I had this online advice column for years, and I realized—back to the theme of listening—that a lot of times people wrote to me about sexual abuse and sexual harassment. There was a doctor who every day would say goodbye to this nurse and stick his fingers in her vagina and say, "See you tomorrow." And she said, "I needed my job. I can't not go to work." I would have said, "You have to leave that job. Any self-respecting woman would leave her job." But my response was, "I am so sorry that's happening to you. It's not your fault. And if you want to leave your job, I'm sure there are resources in your community, and I'd be happy to do that research for you."

Years ago, I remember that somebody said to me, "Can I be a feminist and be pro-life?" I responded, "Absolutely not. That's not feminist," because I heard it as, "Can I go shooting abortion doctors?" Then I realized what they were really saying was, "Can I have my own complications around this issue?" And absolutely, yes. So it's about not only listening but really hearing what people are saying and validating other people's truths.

**Audience** If we're in the fourth wave of feminism, I missed the third wave. When was that? Can you explain?

**AR** The third wave was active from the 1990s. A lot of it percolated around the Anita Hill–Clarence Thomas hearing where a surge of women were running for office and speaking out and speaking their truths. It was also the time of the William Kennedy Smith date rape trial and the Rodney King verdict. What made it a third wave were the younger voices who had never lived in a time without feminism, and there were new spokespeople and new vehicles that weren't just about political and legal change, but creating publications or new organizations. Some people still identify as third wave, so I wouldn't say that it's fully gone. And I have always thought that third wave was "you're coming to feminism regardless of your age," even though mainly young people dominated the conversation.

Playwright Eve Ensler, who wrote *The Vagina Monologues* a bit later, in 1996, was very prolific and out there, but she hadn't made the connection to feminism explicitly. Then all of a sudden, her light bulb went off. She was an example of the third-wave experience, and she used art as her expression of it. She was not afraid of putting women's sexual pleasure in the same conversation as women's sexual pain.

That was unique to third-wave feminism. Previously, feminism was practiced more in exclusively feminist spaces and fighting a space that was not feminist. Third wave tried to make the feminists a little bit more mainstream and the mainstream a little bit more feminist.

**KD** It's also a matter of the way that the media functions. The ways in which we gathered information within that time period were really rapid—that's how I think about my feminism. It's not necessarily what people thought, but it's how people could get access to information. Then within art there were the culture wars with exhibitions like the Whitney's *Black Male* from 1994. It was a moment of intense identity art.

Women artists at that time were working within a feminist politic, and many were also within a queer politic. So there was a way in which we interpreted and were able to receive information—that's how I mark third wave. And then perhaps we're in the fourth wave now because information is everywhere.

**Audience** In reference to female sexual pleasure and agency and sex positivity, Natalie, I'm curious about your series about dominatrixes. That's a topic that can anger both sides of the spectrum, but it speaks a lot to the power of choice. What were your takeaways and observations in terms of empathy?

**NF** I spent probably four or five months going into different dungeons all around New York, and I learned so much. My favorite experience was going to a dungeon called the Parthenon, run by a woman named Ariana. It's the only female-run dungeon in New York—so much of the industry is dominated by men. It's also the only fair-pay dungeon that exists.

I went in not knowing a lot about the S&M world but asked a lot of questions. I took oral histories of everyone I met, both the submissives and the dominants. I was really interested in how their interests and desires developed as they aged and went through life. That was one aspect.

Another aspect was sitting in sessions. I was enthralled by how performative it is and also the dynamic that all of these sessions were

requested by men and delineated by men. They would set the specifications of what the woman would wear, what they would do. In the relationship between the dominatrix and the submissive, it was the woman outwardly assuming the position of authority. It was a complicated relationship, so I made a series of paintings of these constructs, and I paired them with images of ballet dancers. This idea of storytelling through the body, and contortions, and who has the agency as an artist—whose story are you telling?—was interesting to me.

**Audience** I want to say how much I appreciate you saying, "If you see something, say something." It sounds like a subway slogan, but finding it within yourself is important because there is so much chatter online. At some point, saying something can actually make a difference. I would love to hear more from you about the kind of vocabulary we can use to have an impact, make a difference.

**KD** It is tailored to particular experiences. For me, one phrase that I've avoided in the last year is "standing up for a cause." Some people can't stand. There's a circular way that we need to look at our word choices.

The way that Isolde started the conversation around defining feminism is another example. Questioning readily accepted terminologies is powerful. That involves trying to democratize or make more accessible the way in which we talk about certain themes, and finding within a room what may be the lowest common denominator of information.

**AR** As a parent, I'm often in a position of filling out forms and I try to be very intentional. It's a subtle thing to say "parent" and not "mother," or "child" and not "son," but these terms limit us. Similarly, when I wrote my first book, I was deliberate about not *only* identifying people who were not white and not straight, because that's often what we have been conditioned to read. In the news and in the press, everything is white until we know otherwise. So I tried to name white people as white. But to this day it is so fascinating to me that if you don't say the race or the gender, or don't say sexuality, people assume the default.

When we were creating the Third Wave Foundation, we were very intentional about our board structure. It would be no more than 50 percent heterosexual, and we put the difference on the dominant group, not on the group that had historically not been a part of that. I'm not married, and forms ask, "Married or single"; I say, "Well, I'm neither. I'm not married or unmarried." It doesn't make any sense. Why do you need to know if I'm married, legally or not? Pointing out those things, even if you change just one person's mind, that's enough. Challenging the things we take for granted every single day is important.

**NF** I grew up with patronizing language in the South. I encountered it a lot in the art world, almost always from men, and I tend to call out being named "little lady" or "miss." For me, it's related to the subject matter of my work and the assumptions that men usually make about me because of my work. I try to use specificity in language and in how I present myself and my work.

I did an interview for my *Story of O* exhibition. The interviewer said, “It’s so surprising the way that you look because you would never expect someone like you to go into dungeons or to make this kind of work.” I corrected him on the type of language he might want to think about using—language that isn’t so reductive—reducing women or reducing our interior lives or our capacity.

**Audience** There is a lot of talk about feminism in higher education and academia. Do you believe that feminism has become more accessible to folks outside of these institutions? If not, how can we make feminism more accessible? Because it’s one thing to speak about feminism in college or in our classrooms, but what about with sex workers? What about with people who work in the restaurant industry? Sometimes it’s hard to have those conversations—there’s a dissonance there.

**IB** **It’s important to acknowledge our own subject positions, acknowledge who we are and how we frame ourselves in relation to the world around us. Feminism is this ambiguous, fluid, ever-evolving notion. I recognize that I may have my notion of feminism, but it may be different from these women on stage and different from women occupying spaces beyond arts institutions. We have to be able to have a conversation about that while at the same time listening and acknowledging people’s experiences and perspectives on themselves.**

**Technology comes into play because of its ability to transcend and move across borders. Access is incredibly important.**

**KD** Even the word *access*, when it comes to information, can fail. There are so many ways in which feminism can be misread or misnamed—and we all have our own relationship to the pure definition of feminism. If you’re encountering it outside of an academic context, you may not know that you can ask questions of an ideology. The grandest privilege that a formal education can give you is the power to ask questions and the power and tools to critique.

Social media and digital technology puts a lot of stuff in front of us, but how we engage with and interrogate it and how we further the discourse doesn’t always succeed because it is such a delicate place. Tumblr is why I’m here right now. I think so much about the conversations I had about identity within that sphere. We didn’t have much power then, but there was something in being able to find a community to have these sensitive dialogues with outside of the people I was in class with. These types of conversations have been so much a part of my life and a grand privilege of mine, but for others, that isn’t necessarily the case.

So there is a real difference between the weight with which we interpret things and the power and privilege we have around language. How slippery language is in the digital age is an important question to ask.

**AR** I think most people connect with feminism; they just don’t have the label for what they’re connecting with. I look at my own experience. From my youngest years, I watched my mother at a time when she couldn’t get a credit card. She had to have her father sign for her credit card. When

I was born, the choice on my birth certificate was to have “illegitimate” or to have my father’s last name. She gave me my father’s last name so that I wouldn’t be called illegitimate.

When I was six, I had to go to court and fight to get my mom’s name. Think about being a six-year-old in court: “Why do we have to do this, Mom? Why do I have to get your name?” Right now I’m doing something with ROC United, which advocates for restaurant workers. They’re paid unfairly and subjected to sexual harassment. They say, “This is unjust, and I want something that’s going to lead me to a fairer place and lead this whole industry to a place of fairness.” That process is widespread, globally, whether or not you label it feminism. ▲