Research summary

On October 3, 2012 some activists of the international feminist movement FEMEN protested in front of the Venus de Milo statue at the Louvre Museum, by hanging a banner on the sculpture with the words “Rape me. I’m immoral”. The action, following the rape of a woman in Tunisia, was described on the group’s website as an “occupation of the Venus de Milo statue”¹ in order to protest against anti women’s politics in the country. The image of the topless activists in front of the statue wrapped in the banner widely circulated on the internet.

Braidotti has underlined the role of feminism in changing the values attributed to and the representations made of women both “in the longer historical time of patriarchal history” and “in the deeper time of one own’s identity” (p. 55). At the beginning of the 70s feminist activists and artists began to address sexual hierarchies generated and propagated through the ideological and symbolic structures of cultural representations (Wark, 2006). These not only reproduce given gender identities and existing ideologies of femininity, but help in the very construction of those identities. Therefore, cultural intervention is an ideal field for the contestation of the social arrangements of gender. Both deconstructive strategies and celebratory aesthetics are useful in exposing the logic of patriarchal systems of representation and in creating a space for a feminist politics of culture (Wolff, 1990).

Images are an interesting field of cultural intervention where the activity of feminists has been particularly productive. As Deutsche says, one of the most important contributions of art informed by feminism has been the way it has considered the image itself as accountable for maintaining oppressive social norms (2008). Mythical ideals have been used by societies in order to define and restrict behaviours and roles. At the same time, feminist activists and artists tried to address and criticize stereotypical female representations by interacting with images and, through this dialogue, by breaking oppressive social norms. The history of feminist movement usually follows a strict separation among generations and their differences, for example essentialism versus elitism or a naive view of the body versus no ability to imagine the body. Nevertheless, there is also a feeling that feminist debates have overcome this generational model by looking for simultaneities and continuities rather than generations within the movement (Deutsche et al., 2008). The appropriation and transformation of iconic images from the history of art might be considered one of these continuities as it has been a tool used by feminists in order to expose the injustices experienced in the art world and in the real one.

My project aims at analyzing the problematic relationship between images and feminisms from the end of the 60s onwards. Its purpose is to reveal strategies of appropriation and iconoclasm and to look at them in order to understand where their specificity stands and whether they have been used as a peculiar feminist kind of critical strategy. In particular, it analyzes how iconic artworks and ideal female images, such as images of the Venus and of the Madonna, have been used by artists and political activists to emancipator ends.

¹ http://femen.org/news/page/147#post-content
Bruno Latour in his introductory essay of the catalogue for *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*, an exhibition organized at the Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie (ZKM) in 2002, refers to idol smashers using only masculine forms. He states “I guess it is fair to put it in the masculine” (Latour, p. 23) and he continues “for rather obscure reasons, I keep maintaining the masculine for that sort of deed” (Latour, p. 34). On the contrary, it is interesting noticing how he defines the viewer as indifferently “him or her” (Latour, p. 34). My research aims at showing how some strategies, traditionally considered male prerogative, have instead allowed women to regain agency. Furthermore, by looking at the ways in which artworks and images have been used in feminist art and political activism, I also try to reflect on the mass new media technological contemporary landscape and the ways it creates new spaces for contestation.

Research questions:

The main research question that this project examines is whether there is a peculiar way of using / attacking artworks carried out by women/feminists. I will analyze if and how the relationship between images and feminism has changed and whether these transformations reflect the developments of feminist theories in the last fifty years.

In line with the main purpose of the project, other questions that will be approached throughout the research are:

What kind of images have been used by feminists, in the arts and in the political activism, and how?

Is it possible to recognize some patterns of use? Do they reflect key debates in feminist theories?

Is it possible to recognize a specific kind of iconoclasm and appropriation in relation to feminist theories?

What is the impact of new technologies on the use and on the relationship between feminist movements and images?

**Bibliography**


