



## **NASTY WOMEN: THE RIGHT TO APPEAR TOGETHER**

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### **Abstract**

Activists and artists understand that images create meaning about the world around us. Images have the power to expose culturally learned meanings and to serve as catalysts for socio-political activism. On the occasion of the 2016 Women's March in Washington, D.C., thousands of women and their supporters gathered together—to voice their concerns about gender, economic, racial, and environmental injustices; as well as the erosion of reproductive, LGBTQ, and immigrant rights. Events fueling the Women's March, significantly, the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the Nasty Women's Movement, and future events that the march set in motion, represent a pivotal moment in history that shows how women use public assembly for social activism. This article focuses on *strategies of visual address* by *nasty women*, who are artists and activists that contest gender-based inequities and promote feminist practices toward socio-political, cultural, and aesthetic experiences that empower women's lives.

*Keywords:* social media, art education, sexism, digital culture, Women's March

## **Nasty Women Revolt: Sharing and (Re)sharing Creative Interventions through Digital Culture**

To understand how sexism works, to ask why sexism remains stubbornly persistent in shaping worlds, determining possibilities, deciding futures, despite decades of feminist activism, is to work out and to work through the very mechanics of power. Sexism seems to operate as a well-oiled machine that runs all the more smoothly and efficiently for being in constant use. The effects of this constancy are wearing on those to whom sexism is directed. (Ahmed, 2015, p. 5)

The 2017 Women's March on Washington, D.C., on the 21st of January, the day after the inauguration of the U.S. president, along with sister marches around the world, are examples, as the epigraph suggests, of *working through* suffocating sexism to resist violence. In the final presidential debate of 2016, Secretary Hillary Clinton avowed to raise taxes on the wealthy in order to replenish the social security trust fund. Clinton remarked that under the new plan, her taxes would increase, as would Trump's taxes, assuming he did not find a way to avoid paying taxes. There have been many speculations as to why Trump refuses to release his tax returns and whether he used tax-avoidance strategies (Jenkins, 2016; Schreckinger, 2016; Shaxson, 2016). Upon hearing Clinton's statement, Trump leaned into the microphone, pointed his index finger upward to make a point, interrupted her, and uttered the words, "Such a nasty woman."

Almost immediately, social media sites were ablaze with *nasty women* hashtags, the domain name "nasty-women-get-shit-done" was bought minutes after the debate by one of Clinton's supporters and was used to redirect visitors to Clinton's site. Suddenly, #Nasty Woman T-shirts appeared for sale, with part of the sales profits pledged to support *Planned Parenthood*, an organization whose goal is to educate people about reproductive rights, sex education, and health.

Sadly, federal defunding of *Planned Parenthood* was a contentious topic in the aforementioned debate. Following the debate, *The Huffington Post* put out a call for women to define and self-identify by tweeting “#IAmANastyWomanBecause\_” [[NastyWomenGetShitDone.com](http://NastyWomenGetShitDone.com)]. *The New York Times* reported the “Nasty Woman” won the debate (Rappeport, 2016).

Donald Trump has been accused of sexual assault by numerous women, boasted about groping women (e.g., “grab ‘em by the pussy”), openly made derogatory comments about women (e.g., “pigs” and “disgusting slob”) and used gender and age as subtext to argue that Clinton did not have the “stamina” or even “the presidential look” to be commander-in-chief (Bassett, 2016; Lussenhop, 2016). He also failed to rebuke sexist anti-Hillary merchandise endorsed by his supporters and available at his rallies (e.g., “Trump that bitch, Life is a bitch don’t vote for one, Hillary sucks but not like Monica”) (Merlan, 2016). In fact, on national television, Trump made light of supporters flashing denigrating Clinton swag! (D’Angelo, 2016).

Feminist, queer, and critical race scholar Sarah Ahmed (2015) contends that “the critique of sexism is a form of intellectual and political labour that teaches us how worlds are built; how histories become concrete” (p. 8). The response to the 2016 U.S. presidential election is *living history in the making* on the labor required to halt sexism. Feminist cultural studies theorist Susan Bordo (2017) proposes that the demise of Hillary Clinton was “propelled by a perfect storm of *sexism*, partisan politics and media madness” (para. 9). Trump’s sexist remarks and actions constitute physical, emotional, and psychological abuse toward women. His sexism and misogyny directed at Clinton ignited not only indignation but also solidarity that spread rapidly over social media networks (i.e., *went viral*). Women reacted by denouncing the visual culture and language used to validate violence and control women. *Bitch*, *handmaiden*, *cunt*, and *nasty woman* are some of the derogatory-intended visual address that have been reclaimed and redefined by feminists (Butler, 1997; Keifer-Boyd & Smith-Shank, 2006). Women not only reclaimed injurious language, but also, at the world-wide 2017 Women’s Marches on January 21st, there was an intensity of sharing and (re)sharing digital

visual culture that pushed back against misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia. The social media momentum expanded and documented the protests surrounding the presidential inauguration.

### Nasty Women on the March

Wearing knitted pink cat-eared hats, deemed *pussy hats*, hundreds of thousands of women filled the National Mall in Washington, D.C. in a united movement against the extant and incoming political order. Women and their supporters also coalesced in different cities around the world to amplify their voices. America Ferrera’s speech at the Women’s March stands out for its ability to raise awareness, in a geopolitical context, of how the President of the United States’s rhetoric of hate legitimizes sexism, emboldens racism, and scapegoats migrants. Speaking at the Women’s March, Ferrera shared concerns that resonated with many of the protestors when she stated:

As a woman and as a proud first-generation American born to Honduran immigrants, it’s been disheartening at a time like this to be both an immigrant and a woman in this country ... Our dignity, our character, our rights have all been under attack and the platform of hate and division assumed power yesterday. But, the President is not America, his cabinet is not America, Congress is not America, WE are America. And, we are here to stay. (Ferrera, 2017, n. p.)

After one of the largest protest marches in Washington, D.C., participants placed their signs, posters, and art along the fence of the White House, a wall composed of visual representations—a glimpse of the power of assembly. The protests raised important questions about the politics and pedagogies at play in the presidential campaign with gender at the center; and highlighted the obstacles that women continue to face to achieve greater political participation and decision making power regarding policies affecting women and their families.

The Women’s March operated on modes of action across a plurality of subject positions and social relations. This intersection is acknowledged by Ferrera’s speech at the march, “Mr. Trump, we refuse. We reject the demonization of our Muslim brothers and sisters” (2017, n. p.). Further, she said: “We will

1. See video link in D’Angelo (2016) at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/deplorable-anti-clinton-merch-at-trump-rallies\\_us\\_572836e1e4b016f378936c22](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/deplorable-anti-clinton-merch-at-trump-rallies_us_572836e1e4b016f378936c22)

not give up our rights to safe and legal abortions, we will not ask our LGBTQ families to go backwards, we will not go from being a nation of immigrants to a nation of ignorance” (Ferrera, 2017, n. p.). Understanding intersectional forms of inequity widens understanding of multidimensional systems of oppression and, also, provides opportunities for the mobilization of collective action (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000; National Women’s Studies Association, 2017). Further, images (e.g., posters, placards, photos, art) played a significant role in activating critiques against sexism and were used to promote creative activities and interactions that helped to conceptualize and communicate the experiences that matter to women.

### The Power of Visual Address

Images—whether visual, text-based, or sensorial—are a vital part of communication. The power of visual address lies in the significant means by which people (e.g., artists and activists) use images to convey meaning, tell stories, stimulate curiosity, inspire delight, incite shock, promote learning, and invoke action. Further, feminist visual modes of address are counterpoised to the transmission and passive consumption of knowledge conveyed and dictated by those in power such as political institutions and neoliberal markets. Artists and activists discussed in this article, invite participants to produce rather than consume knowledge through creative activities. They call upon people to use modes of communication that value multiple ways of knowing, and summon diverse communities across socio-cultural spheres to take stock of what needs to be done, to speak-out, and to take collective action to solve social and political problems faced by women today.

In Denton, Texas, where I live and teach, there were many inspiring signs from the local Women’s March. Not knowing how to knit or sew, yet armed with determination, I set out to construct pussy hats. My daughter and I made our way to the city square, an area where many university students gather and the place for the local Women’s March. As we walked toward the March, a woman riding a bike loudly screamed at us: “You look ridiculous, you look like you have underwear on your heads.” Admittedly, the hats were not the best or the prettiest but one could make out the intended pointed cat ears. Of course, this was not the real issue. What was striking to me is that even though there was a seven-year-old girl walking with

us, wearing her own kitty hat, the woman on the bike was so irate, she could not hold back her anger. I wondered if she later reflected on how her behavior startled and confused the child; after all, it was her first public protest. This encounter caused me to pay attention to children and the signs they carried or helped their parents carry.

At the march, a group of girls wore pink cat hats, some wore pink tutus, and most wore T-Shirts emblazoned with “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun-Damental Human Rights”<sup>2</sup> and held signs with the slogan: *Love Not Hate, Makes America Great*. A baby was sitting on the grass next to his mother, who held a sign that read *FEARS Destroy US: Loves Unites Us*. One young girl held a pink and yellow sign with the words *I’m the Change*. Another girl, probably 8-9 years old, had a white sign with blue letters that said, *If You Build a Wall My Generation Will Tear It Down*. There were many signs that boldly stated: *NASTY WOMEN will make (her)story* and *Women’s Rights are Human Rights*. Image and text-based posters repudiated physical violence against women such as with the slogan: *Women’s Bodies/Our Rights/Grab the Power*. My encounters with young people at the Women’s March caused me to reflect and envision the important work of these young girls as future activists—as poets, presidents, musicians, visual artists, and curators.

The three interventions discussed next, constitute the basis of creative activities that expand the boundaries and concerns of feminists in their quest for social agency and political empowerment. Social media sites have been particularly important spaces for women to construct and practice radical ways of doing feminism(s). While social media is paradoxically implicated in the perpetuation of sexism and misogyny, where phallogentrism is incubated and deployed in cyberspace, social media can also offer opportunities to engage in social networking and collective action to detour privilege and oppression through feminist education as cultural production.

### Spoken Word – Nasty Woman

Feeling angry, passionate, and a great sense of urgency, Nina Donovan (2017), a teenager in Franklin, Tennessee, picks up her phone, selects the note 2. The title references Cindy Lauper’s catchy 1980s song, “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

function, and begins to write. She can't stop writing but when she finally does, she tells us:

*I am a nasty woman*

*[...] I am not as nasty as Confederate flags being tattooed across my city.<sup>3</sup> Maybe the South actually is gonna rise again; maybe for some it never really fell. Blacks are still in shackles and graves just for being Black. Slavery has been re-interpreted as the prison system in front of people who see melanin as animal skin.*

*I am not as nasty as racism, fraud, conflict of interest, homophobia, sexual assault, transphobia, white supremacy, misogyny, ignorance, white privilege.*

Violence is the foundation of patriarchy, a system of privilege and power that is used to create mechanisms that perpetuate ideologies that uphold unjust social structures. For example, systemic gender oppression, gender-bias, and violence are often dismissed, minimized, normalized, and blamed on women. Patriarchy is what makes sexism and other forms of oppression, such as racism and transphobia, possible (Ahmed, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; hook, 2000; Pérez Miles & Jenkins, 2017).

Donavon's (2017) poem continues:

*I'm not as nasty as using little girls like Pokémon before their bodies have even developed ...*

*I'm nasty like the battles my grandmothers fought to get me into that voting booth.*

*I'm nasty like the fight for wage equality. Scarlett Johansson: Why were the famous actors paid less than half of what the male actors earned last*

3. As I write this article, Confederate and Nazi flags fly in Charlottesville, Virginia. The National Women's Studies Association (NWSA) Newsletter authored by the Executive Council, denounces the recent actions of White supremacist in Charlottesville, which resulted in death and violence: "White supremacy and fascism have always been intricately connected with misogyny, patriarchy, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, and settler-colonial logics" (n. p.). Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (1989) and bell hooks (2000), have written eloquently about the significance of understanding, writing, and teaching about intersectional forms of oppression to fight multivalent and multifarious forms of oppression that seek to dehumanize certain groups of people.

*year? ...*

*I am unafraid to be nasty because I am nasty like Susan, Elizabeth, Eleanor, Amelia, Rosa, Gloria, Condoleezza, Sonia, Malala, Michelle, Hillary.*

*And our pussies ain't for grabbin' ... So if you [are] a nasty woman or love one who is, let me hear you say, "HELL YEAH!"*

Ashley Judd performed Donovan's poem *Nasty Woman* at the Women's March in Washington, D.C., in front of hundreds of thousands of people. Donovan explains that the second she heard Trump utter the words "nasty woman" she said to herself, "I've got to write a nasty woman piece . . . I reclaimed it" (Donovan as cited in Balakit, 2017, para. 5).<sup>4</sup> There have been many social gains brought about by feminist movements, however, the lives of women, including young women, continue to be shaped by systemic sexism (Ahmed, 2016; McRobbie, 2004). At the Women's March, and subsequent massive demonstrations and marches, a social movement of women politicize gender (in)justice and promote creative activities as sites of agency, resistance, and subversion.

### ***Pussy Grabs Back***

Kim Boekbinder's art is an articulation of feminist politics that functions as a call-out to sexist politics. Lisa Nakamura (2015), a leading scholar in digital media, analyzes call-out culture, in particular "call-outs [that] educate, protest and design around toxic social environments in digital media" (p. 106). Boekbinder's music video, *Pussy Grabs Back* is a response to the toxic environment created by Trump's remarks and actions during the 2016 presidential election. Boekbinder uses the impact of digital media to convey and share her ideas. Her anger and humor expressed in the playful images, smart lyrics, and snarky tone of the music video has something to say about the artist's reclamations of gender-based intimidation.

In *Pussy Grabs Back* (Figure 1), Boekbinder depicts a woman who looks like she just stepped out of the 1950s. Her dress is synched at the waist and the

4. Also see A. Newell-Hanson (2017) for an interview with Nina Donovan and video of Donovan reciting her poem.

poodle-like skirt falls below the knee. She stands alert with her hands placed on her waist as if she is waiting for an explanation. Her face is that of a caracal cat with distinct tufted ears. The part woman and part cat collage in various tones of gray, moves around the screen. At times, she raises her arms up in the air and bears her sharp teeth. Throughout the video there are cameo appearances by different types of women/cat assemblages, some have adorable kitty faces and are dressed in bright colored pantsuits (reminiscent of Clinton’s famous pantsuits), some she-cats sport glittery blue skirts and others wear Pope-like regalia.



Figure 1. A still from Kim Boekbinder’s (2016) provocative *Pussy Grabs Back* music video.

The music is melodious and Boekbinder’s voice is soft. At the beginning of the music video, one can hear audio of Trump’s voice repeating the words, “grab ‘em by pussy.”<sup>5</sup> In chorus, Boekbinder talks back to Trump by repeating the phrase “pussy grabs back.” Intermittent text corresponding to the lyrics flash on the screen:

**Pussy Grabs Back**

We’ve been saying it for years  
 But you’ve been blocking up your ears  
 Until a man himself said it  
 And now you’re all shocked

That stupid look on your face  
 As you look on in disgrace  
 You know that on November 8th  
 This vote is getting rocked

Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back  
 Tired of you sad, sexist, sacks  
 Pussy grabs back

If it’s unclear  
 We’ll no longer demure  
 We won’t hold your secrets  
 In our feminine pockets

We’re not daughters, not wives  
 We’re humans, with lives  
 On November 8th  
 We’re gonna rock it

Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back  
 You’ve outlived your third act  
 Pussy grabs back

The man’s been racist as Fuck  
 But now he’s out of luck?  
 If pussy is his downfall  
 We’ll take it

5. The audio is from Trump’s interview with Billy Bush, a reporter for *Access Hollywood*. The video was leaked before Trump’s second debate with Clinton and created a great uproar.

If you think it's just Trump  
 Go home, you're drunk  
 Leave the voting to the big girls  
 Not the rapists

Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back  
 You think you're under attack?  
 Pussy grabs back

Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back  
 Fuck your Tic Tacs  
 Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back  
 Pussy grabs back

Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy

Lord, give me the confidence  
 of a mediocre white man.

Lord, give me the confidence  
 of a mediocre white man.

Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy/ Pussy  
 Pussy Grabs Back



Figure 2. Boekbinder's music deconstructs sexist language and actions.

Political, psychological, and instrumental violence were routinized in the presidential election, such that it became part of everyday life that women had to endure and confront in the media and in private and public spheres. Boekbinder's music video confronts sexist rhetoric that dehumanizes women and reduces them to object(s), to vaginal synonyms, and to language and actions that support a culture of rape. For Emilie Buchwald, Pamela Fletcher, and Martha Roth (2005), a rape culture:

Is a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women. It is a society where violence is seen as sexy and sexuality as violent. In a rape culture, women perceive a continuum of threatened violence that ranges from sexual remarks to sexual touching to rape itself. A rape culture condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as the norm. (p. XI)

Rape culture is also characterized by victim blaming (Pérez Miles, 2006, 2013), 'slut'-shaming (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2014; Ringrose & Renold, 2012), and

objectifying women's bodies. In other words, the matrix of rape culture (sexism, misogyny, aggressive behavior, and violence) is not an individual act but enabled by socio-cultural practices that trivialize and normalize violence against women (Ahmed, 2015; Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005; Gill, 2007).

In short, inspired by the [#Pussy Grabs Back meme](#) created by writer and performer Amanda Duarte and Jessica Bennett, author of the book *Feminist Fight Club*, Boekbinder (2005) calls on women to grab back power through the voting process. She uses her cultural production and digital modes of activism to draw attention to gender-based bias and abuse. She recently collaborated with film producer and activist Laverne Cox, to create a visual essay that brings to the forefront much needed conversations about gender diversity and transgender issues and concerns. The creative processes discussed thus far, point to the emergence of feminism(s) that are networked through social media to mobilize feminist actions and efficacy with the aim to end pervasive sexism and foster new forms of solidarity that are intersectional, such as the creative interventions discussed above, and the Nasty Women Art and Activism Movement discussed next.

### **Nasty Women Art and Activism Movement**

It started a few days after the presidential elections with a single Facebook post that went viral: “Hello female artists/curators! Let’s organize a NASTY WOMEN group show!!! Who’s interested???” Social media played a central role in the collective actions surrounding the Nasty Women Art and Activism Movement, initiated by Roxanne Jackson and Jessamyn Fiore, a mixed media sculptor and a curator, writer, and artist, respectively (Cohen, 2016). Jackson and Fiore were concerned about the threat to women’s rights, post-election. They were not alone, within hours the response to the call was overwhelming and resulted in a major art exhibition in New York at the Knockdown Center in Maspeth, Queens, and at more than 40 other exhibition sites in the U.S. and abroad.<sup>6</sup>

The organizer’s decision not to turn away any artist as long as the works came from “self-identifying Nasty Women” challenged prevailing standards in the artworld used to regulate who can be an artist and whose art will be legitimized,

curated, and displayed. There were more than 1000 artworks submitted. Volunteers at the Knockdown Center built hot pink, free standing 10 foot letters that spelled the words “Nasty Women.” The gigantic letters were used to display the art. According to the Nasty Women Facebook page, the show at the Knockdown Center raised \$50,000 dollars; and \$200,000 nationwide has been raised to support *Planned Parenthood*.

The online and offline events surrounding the *Nasty Women* art exhibit created dialogue and debate about the need for gender equity and justice. The programming included concerts by numerous DJs and an all-female teen alt-rock band, poster making workshops, panel discussions, and opportunities to work with artists. The Art Salon, which was part of the programming at the New York exhibition, further supported egalitarian and non-hierarchical modes of participation. The Art Salon was created and moderated by Ventiko, the conceptual artist known for her performances and wearable sculptures.<sup>7</sup> The Art Salon was established to create a safe and supporting environment for participants to present and discuss their art. The goal of the Art Salon was to foster dialogue, the exchange of ideas, and opportunities to build solidarity and community.

The *Nasty Women* art exhibition and activism also created an important moment in time to promote dialogue and understanding about the complexities of social inequality across multiple intersections such as ethnicity, race, social class, nationality, and citizenship. The panel discussion titled “Power Share/Power Surge” brought together a group of artists, writers, and curators to pose questions such as: How can we share power? Where do we connect? What can we do? (Clifford & Acosta, 2017). In an interview with *cnneckting*—a digital platform for connecting women on and offline through events, Jackson (2017) noted that they want “to keep the energy and momentum going and think about how [they] can do more with being politically active” (p. 9). One of the ways to keep the momentum alive is to seek creative work that demonstrate it is possible to produce alternative modes to the mechanisms of patriarchal power—modes of visual address that function as a means to build communities and community relations forged on equity and respect.

6. Unless otherwise specified, information about the *Nasty Women Art and Activism Movement* is derived from the Knockdown Center website at <https://knockdown.center/>

7. See *Sylvia Dean and Me* (Ventiko, 2017) for photo stills of Ventiko’s performances, and of the artists who facilitated participants’ dialogues at the Art Salon for the *Nasty Women* art exhibition.

### Concluding Nasty Women Considerations

*Nasty Women* posters announced at different marches throughout the United States (e.g., “I Can’t Believe I Still Have to Protest This FUCKING SHIT” and “Same S\*T Different Century”) echo the epigraph at the beginning of the article, which suggests sexism is like a well-oiled machine that is in constant use, not going away, and must be challenged (Ahmed, 2015). In this article, I wrote about a new generation of artists and activists, whose efforts to end sexism are ongoing and relentless. These women assembled to resist gender-based inequities such as misogyny centered on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. I proposed that women’s insertion/activism in the polity, for instance, in the context of the Women’s March in Washington, D.C., and the Nasty Women Movement, not only confront misogyny (e.g., sexual, physical, and psychological abuse to women) but also reclaim women’s agency through activism on the ground, through their art, and with social media. I specifically focused on women’s creative intervention such as posters, visual culture, poetry, social media, and music. I also showed that nasty women, that is, women who run for president, artists, and activists, use the power of visual address as forms of agency to mobilize positive social and political change.

Images are collective symbols and ideas by which individuals can act together to support a cause, formulate collective goals, and create nodal points to organize movements for social and political purposes with real-world and positive effects. In this respect, the power of the visual in the Women’s March and the Nasty Women Movement and Activism are pedagogical. The lessons learned from women who resist and restructure dehumanizing social conditions through their creative activism has the potential to drive societal commitment to gender equity.



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