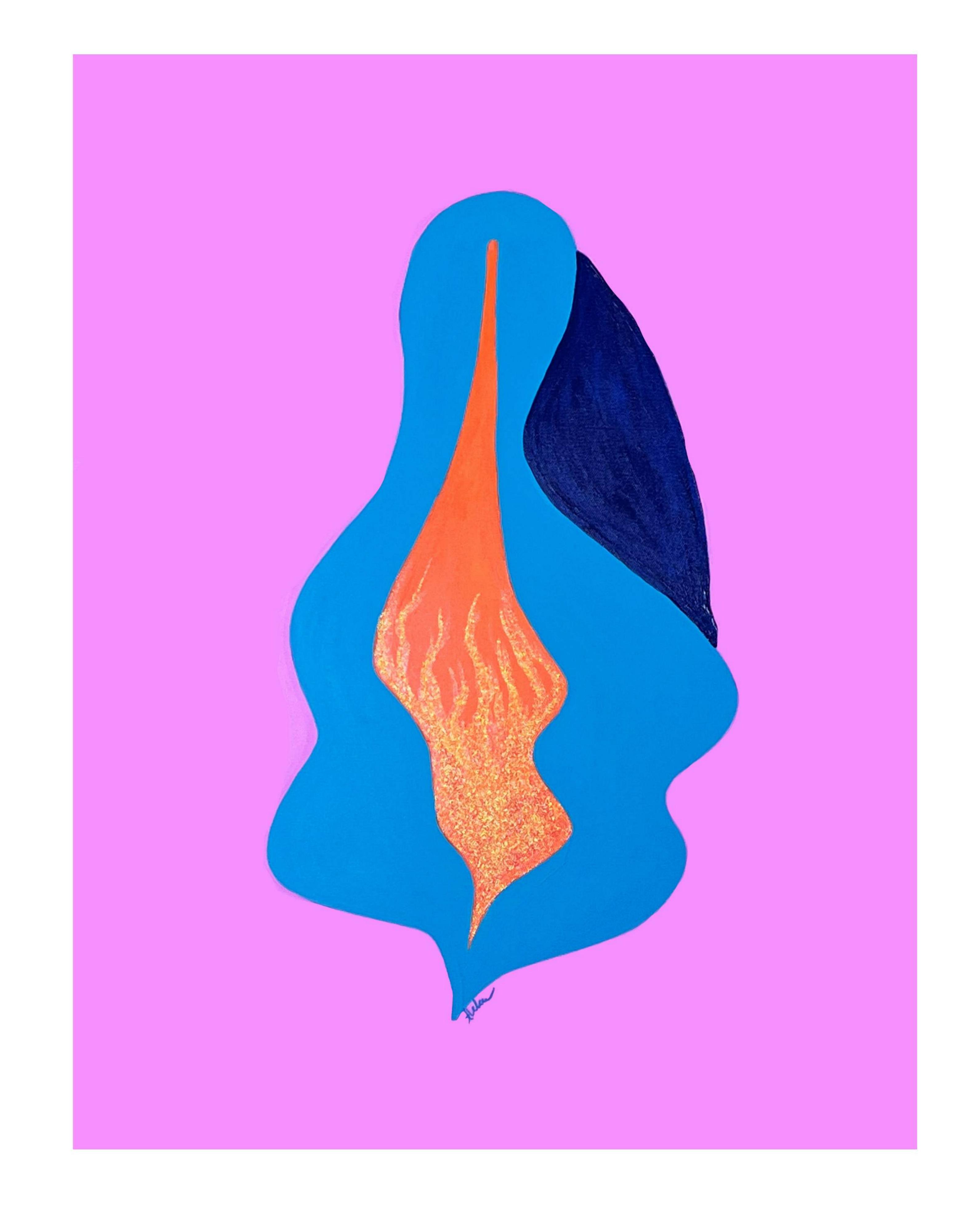
Do contemporary women still need

## FEMINIST ART?

text: Aleksandra Cegielska images: courtesy of the artist



Women have the right to vote, run businesses, are financially independent, and know how to defend themselves. But do they really?

Every 10 minutes, a woman or girl dies somewhere in the world, and 60% of such cases occur in the home environment (according to the "Femicides in 2023" report from UN Women and UNODC). In the European Union, the gender pay gap still stands at 12.7% per hour. The current European Parliament is composed of 63% men, and although women make up 51% of artists, they are drastically underrepresented in art galleries: only 5% of London galleries exhibit works by both genders in equal proportions (according to Tate.org). These numbers not only overwhelm but show how much work we still have ahead of us. The discussion about the position of women, their safety, and equality has not lost its relevance. Can feminist art play an essential role in this struggle?

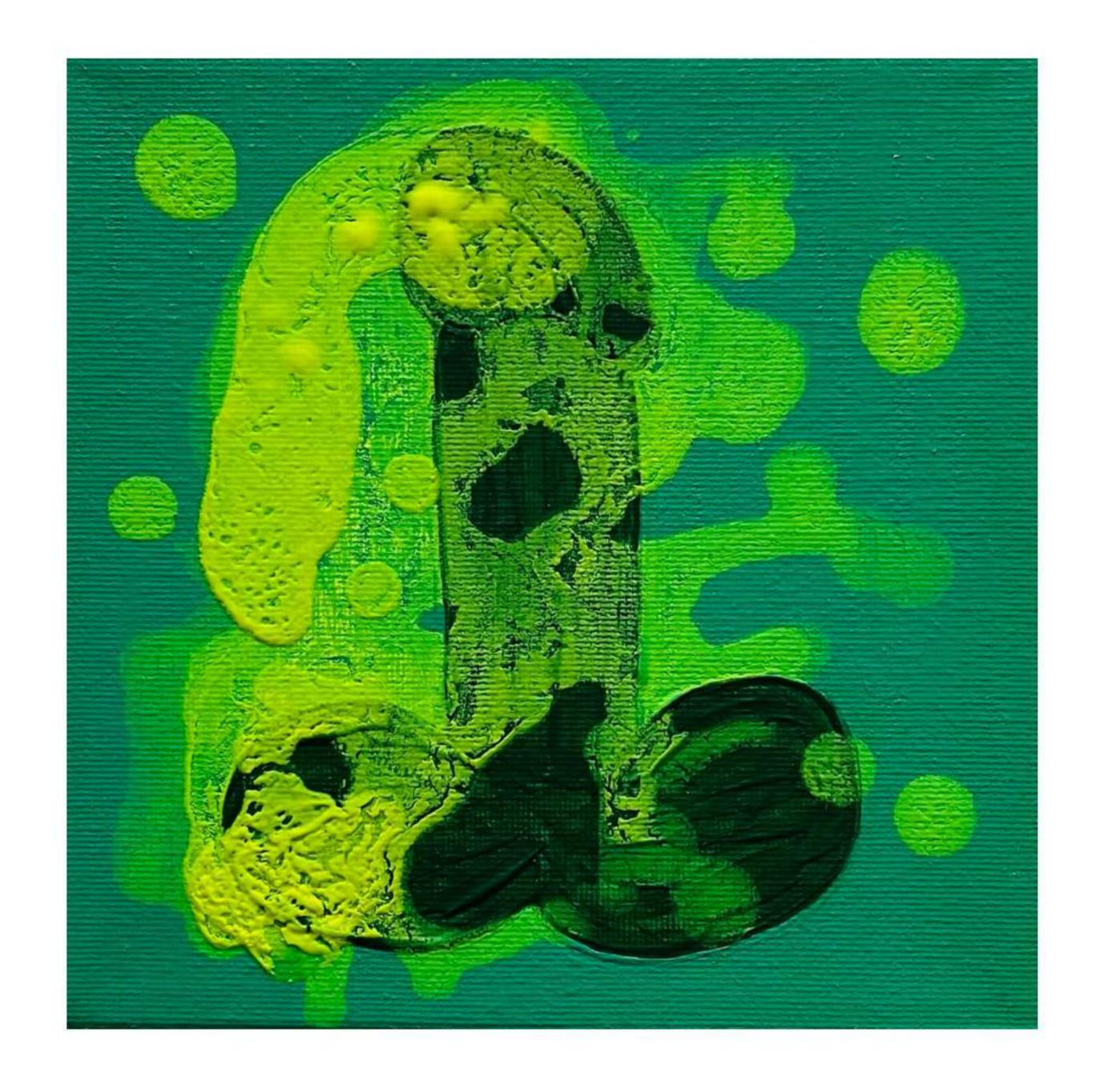
Feminist art emerged in the 1960s, driven by movements for women's rights, civil rights, and LGBTQ+ rights. It was a response to the exclusion of women from dominant artistic narratives. It became a space where female artists could question traditional social roles, process women's experiences, and regain control over their own bodies. Pivotal events such as the Womanhouse exhibition (1972), organized by Judy Chicago and MiriamSchapiro, are etched in history as a voice against violence against women, the taboo of sexuality, and the devaluation of women's work as "craft." Artists like Ana Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois, and Cindy Sherman explored embodiment, identity, and social restrictions.

Griselda Pollock wrote: "Feminism does not exist in a vacuum. It permeates class, race, and sexuality." This combination of universal rights and local experiences made feminist art dynamic and inclusive.





is like a weight on a scale —
necessary to balance
the dominant narrative of
the male gaze





For centuries, women have been portrayed according to canons created by men: from the Renaissance Rubensian ideals of beauty to modern, oiled bodies on magazine covers. Today, when female artists speak about the body, sexuality, or orgasms, it sparks outrage. Why? Is it because they are reclaiming a narrative that was denied to them for centuries?

Feminist art does not objectify men. It does not commodify their bodies or exploit them. It simply offers a broader perspective. Women's experiences differ from men's – arising from different social, cultural, and biological realities.

When a man returns home alone late at night, he rarely worries about his safety. A woman, however, even in a large, well-lit city, must assess the risk. She holds her keys between her fingers, pretends to talk on the phone, or wonders if the taxi she ordered will be safe. These fears are not imagined – they stem from real experiences. In 2022, over 40,000 cases of domestic violence were reported in Poland, with the majority of victims being women. When a man wears an "inappropriate" suit, no one doubts his competence. A woman must balance between expectations – to look "professional," but not "provocative," to be "feminine," but not "too bold." When a man is assertive, he is called a leader; when a woman behaves similarly, she is often called "difficult" or "arrogant."







Feminist art highlights these differences and ensures that women's experiences are no longer marginalized as "personal" or "secondary." Examples like Marina Abramović's performance, which explores human endurance, or Agnès Varda's films, revealing the invisible work of women, force the viewer to reflect on everyday realities that men simply do not have to face.

The difference in perspective is not about women wanting to dominate — they simply want to be visible.

Visible with their truth, their fears, and aspirations that have been ignored so far. Feminist art is a space where women's experiences find their rightful expression and are not treated as something "lesser."

Ultimately, feminist art speaks of inclusivity – not just for women, but for other marginalized groups that have been overlooked or excluded from the mainstream of culture and art. It is not only a critique of patriarchy, although dismantling this dominant social structure is a key part of it. It is also a proposal for alternatives: new ways of telling the world's stories, which include the diversity of experiences, identities, and perspectives.

Feminist art is a bridge that connects women, men, non-binary people, queer people, and individuals from different cultures and social classes. It does not have to be created only by women or only for women. It can be seen as a tool for understanding how systems of power impact different social groups, rejecting stereotypical divides of "us" and "them." As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie noted in her essay We Should All Be Feminists, feminism is not about domination – it is about equality. Similarly, feminist art does not aim to fight against men but rather against all forms of inequality. It is a universal tool that forces us to reflect on why gender, racial, and class inequalities still exist, and how they can be reduced.

What makes feminist art unique is its ability to ask difficult questions:

Why are art galleries still dominated by works by white, cis-heterosexual men?

Why are women's bodies censored in art but objectified in advertisements? Why are people from minority groups treated as exotic rather than equal participants in dialogue?

Feminist art creates space for these questions and shows that inclusivity is not a privilege – it is a necessity. The work of artists like Kara Walker, Ai Weiwei, or Yoko Ono, despite different cultural backgrounds and aesthetics, illustrates how art can serve as a medium calling for equality and justice.

Inclusivity is where the power lies.

Contemporary artists like Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas, or Louise Bourgeois often distance themselves from the label "feminist art." They argue that they want to talk about their personal experiences—

embodiment, emotions, relationships
– without necessarily framing these
topics within the broad, ideological
context of feminism. For many of
them, their work should not be a
manifesto but a universal, intimate
message that relates to everyone,
regardless of gender.

However, the decision to avoid the "feminist art" label is not only about artistic autonomy. It is also a reaction to the historical and social connotations of the term itself. For some female artists, "feminism" is associated with the narratives of the 1970s when feminist art focused on embodiment, vaginacentered









themes, and anti-patriarchal manifestos, such as Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party or Carolee Schneemann's Interior Scroll. While these works were groundbreaking, contemporary artists may not relate to their language or feel the need to tackle similar subjects. Additionally, the term "feminist" is often reduced by critics, curators, and the media to a narrow frame in which female creativity is relegated to a "social manifesto" on behalf of feminism.

Being labeled a "feminist artist" often changes the way an artist's work is perceived, with the piece being viewed primarily through the lens of gender, rather than its artistic context. In contrast, men who address similar topics are rarely treated this way. Their art is considered "universal." So, why should women be defined primarily by their gender and affiliation with the feminist movement?

The current connotation of "feminism" in public debate, where it is sometimes seen as "extreme" or "anti-male," can also discourage female artists from using this label. For this reason, many fear that the term could limit the reception of their work, diverting attention from the core message they wish to express.

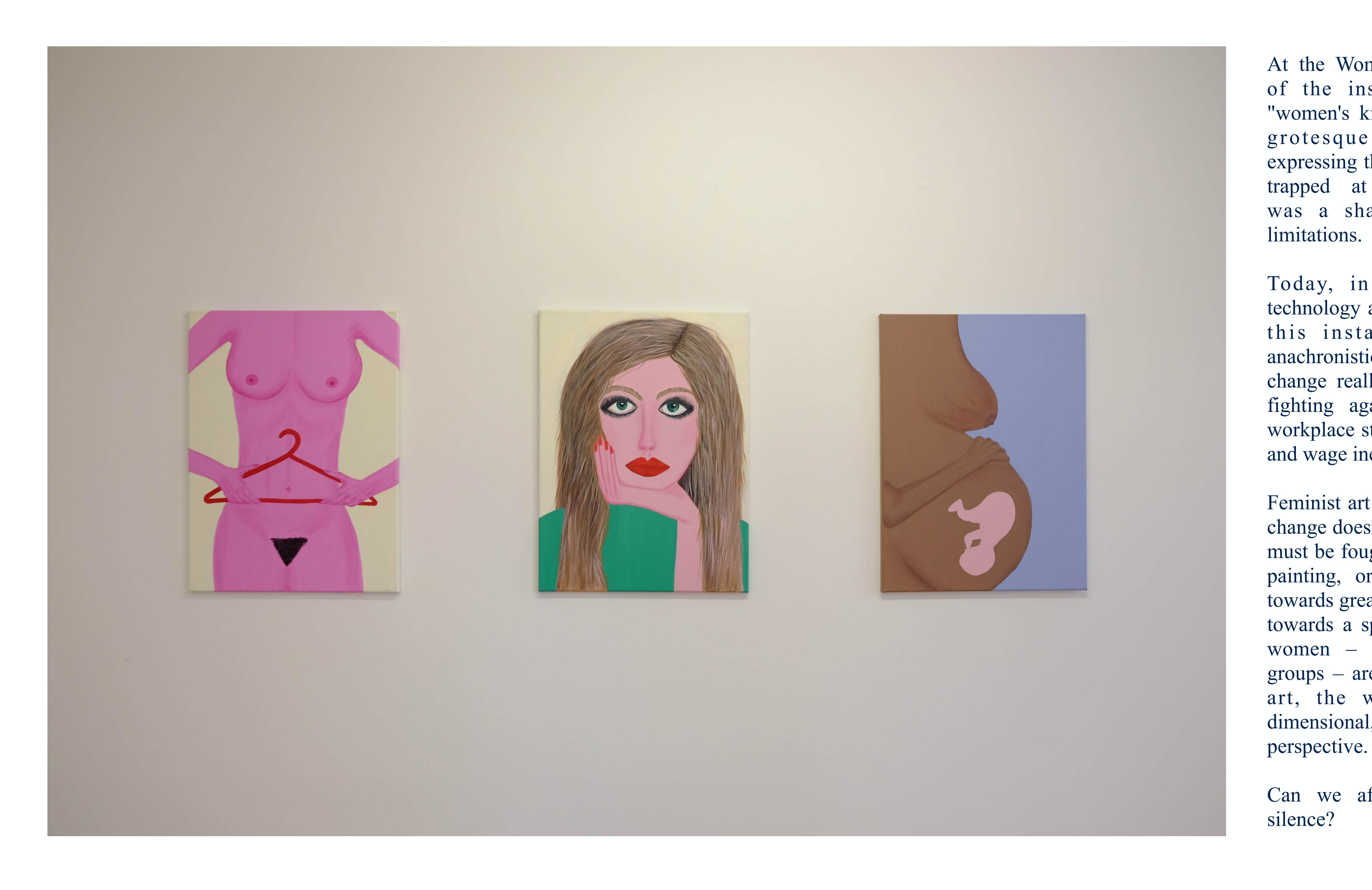
Can artists fully separate from feminism in a world that doesn't provide equal conditions for women and men?

In her famous essay "Why have there been no great women artists?, Linda Nochlin points out the structural inequalities that have excluded women from access to education, art institutions, and wide recognition. Though these inequalities are smaller today, they still exist. As long as galleries, museums, and critics continue to evaluate women through the prism of their gender rather than their talent, feminism – also in art – will remain necessary.

Even if contemporary artists try to avoid the label of "feminist," their works that challenge traditional norms, break taboos, or reveal previously invisible women's experiences inevitably become part of this movement. The irony is that they are often categorized as feminist regardless of their own intentions.

Creating art that deviates from patriarchal narratives is, in essence, a feminist act – even if the artists themselves do not want to call it that. It is not about rejecting feminism as an idea, but about the need to redefine it in art. Contemporary female artists are fighting for the right to autonomy – to be seen as creators, not just feminists. It is a fight for creative freedom, where women's art no longer remains "other" or "alternative," but becomes a full voice in the universal artistic dialogue.

AS LONG AS PATRIARCHY REMAINS THE MAIN POWER STRUCTURE IN CULTURE, FEMINIST ART WILL EXIST -NOT AS A NICHE, BUT AS A NECESSARY COUNTERPOINT. IT IS ART THAT DOES NOT ALLOW US TO FORGET THATTHE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY IS NOT OVER.



At the Womanhouse exhibition, one of the installations depicted a "women's kitchen" – a space full of grotesque dishes and objects expressing the frustration of a woman trapped at home. In the 1970s, this was a sharp critique of social limitations.

Today, in the age of modern technology and changing social roles, this installation might seem anachronistic. But has such a huge change really occurred? We are still fighting against domestic violence, workplace stereotypes, abortion rights and wage inequality.

Feminist art serves as a reminder that change doesn't happen on its own — it must be fought for. Every exhibition, painting, or performance is a step towards greater representation, towards a space where the voices of women — and other marginalized groups — are heard. Without feminist art, the world would be one-dimensional, seen only from a single

Can we afford such a luxury as silence?