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## **ART AS ACTIVISM: CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS OF ECONOMIC INE- QUALITY**

**Abstract.** This article examines how feminist art critiques economic inequality, with a focus on unpaid labor, professional barriers, and economic marginalization, and argues that feminist art not only scrutinizes instances of economic inequality but also emerges as a potential transformative force, capable of inciting systemic change through its unique ability to engage audiences emotionally and intellectually. By engaging with feminist art theory and activism, the study highlights how feminist women artists employ visual and performance art to expose systemic inequities and amplify the voices of marginalized women. Through case studies, including Mierle Laderman Ukeles's Maintenance Art Manifesto, Mary Kelly's Post-Partum Document, Barbara Kruger's Your Body is a Battleground, Andrea Bowers's installations on gender equity, Ana Teresa Fernández's Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border), and Martha Rosler's Semiotics of the Kitchen, the article illustrates the transformative, social and economic, potential of feminist art. These works challenge societal norms, provoke critical discourse, and foster empathy, demonstrating the power of art as a catalyst for social change. The present study employs a multidisciplinary approach, incorporating feminist art theory, socio-economic analysis, and cultural critique to explore the intersection of art, feminism, and activism. While acknowledging the limitations of art as a tool for systemic reform, the study argues and aims to manifest that feminist art remains a vital medium for addressing gendered economic disparities. The conclusion calls for further research into digital feminist art and intersectional perspectives, emphasizing the evolving role of art in advocating for equity and justice.

**Key words:** Feminist art, economic inequality, unpaid labor, activism, gender equity

**JEL classification:** Z11, J16

## Introduction

Art has long served as a powerful medium for social critique, particularly when addressing systemic inequalities. Within the intersection of art, feminism, and activism lies a unique dynamic space where creative expression becomes a catalyst for challenging entrenched social norms and injustices. Feminist art, in particular, has consistently sought to expose and resist structures of oppression, focusing on issues such as gender inequality and the economic systems that perpetuate them, addressing the political and personal dimensions of women's lives. By merging artistic practice with activism, feminist artists transform visual culture into a space for dialogue and resistance, bringing attention to the often-overlooked realities of women's economic struggles (Pollock 1988; Lippard 1995). Often by amplifying marginalized voices, feminist artists aim to draw attention to critical issues such as gender discrimination, oppression, and economic inequity. These works disrupt traditional artistic narratives, reframing art as a tool for critique and a catalyst for dialogue and resistance. Economic inequality remains one of the most pressing feminist concerns, deeply entwined with gendered labor dynamics and impacting women worldwide. Women disproportionately bear the burden of unpaid domestic and care-giving labor, which, despite being essential to societal functioning, is systematically undervalued and excluded from formal economic metrics (Federici 2004; Bhattacharya 2017). The unequal division of domestic labor and care-giving responsibilities further exacerbates gender disparities, leaving women with limited economic opportunities and autonomy. Additionally, the persistent wage gap, occupational segregation, and higher rates of poverty among women highlight further structural disparities that disadvantage women economically (Fraser 2013). These inequities are further exacerbated by race, class, and global location, with women of marginalized identities facing compounded disadvantages (hooks 1984; Collins 1990). Such systemic imbalances demand critical examination, and feminist artists have risen to this challenge by addressing these

themes in their work. Thus, these issues have provided fertile ground for creative exploration, enabling feminist artists to expose the often-invisible structures that perpetuate women's subjugation within capitalist frameworks.

The present paper aims to examine how feminist artists have used their work to expose, critique, and challenge economic inequalities affecting women. Through visual art, performance, and mixed media, these artists interrogate the systemic forces that commodify women's bodies, devalue their labor, and perpetuate social hierarchies. Their art not only critiques these injustices but also invites viewers to envision alternative possibilities, where equality and justice replace exploitation and marginalization. By situating their art within the broader context of feminist activism, these creators bridge the gap between personal experience and collective struggle, transforming art into a site of resistance. By analyzing some of the visual and performative strategies employed by these artists, the discussion seeks to illuminate how feminist art acts as a form of activism, fostering awareness and inciting change. The article thus situates feminist art within a broader framework of social and economic critique, examining how it engages with specific themes of unpaid labor, the glass ceiling, and poverty. The analysis is therefore structured around key themes in feminist critiques of economic inequality. The first section outlines the theoretical framework, situating feminist art within broader discussions of unpaid labor, the glass ceiling, and economic marginalization. The second section delves into representations of unpaid labor, exploring how feminist artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Mary Kelly highlight the invisible yet indispensable domestic and care-giving work performed by women. Through works such as Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* and Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*, these artists challenge the cultural devaluation of reproductive labor. The third section focuses on barriers such as the glass ceiling, wage gaps, and alike disadvantages, with case studies of Barbara Kruger's and Andrea Bowers' work that employ provocative visual language to critique power imbalances and advocate for workplace equity. The fourth section addresses the portrayal of

women's economic marginalization, analyzing works by Ana Teresa Fernández and Martha Rosler that confront poverty, labor exploitation, and systemic disenfranchisement. These case studies illuminate the ways feminist artists bring visibility to structural inequalities while fostering critical engagement and empathy. By weaving together theoretical insights and case studies, this article seeks to underscore the transformative potential of feminist art to challenge economic inequalities. As a form of activism, feminist art not only exposes the gendered dimensions of economic injustice but also often re-imagines, either directly or by implication, a more equitable future. Through their work, feminist artists push the boundaries of both art and activism, demonstrating that creative expression can be a potent force for social change.

### **1. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Art and Economic Inequality**

Feminist art has long served as a critical medium for addressing the socio-economic inequalities that disproportionately affect women. Rooted in feminist theory, this art form interrogates the intersection of gender, labor, and power, transforming creative expression into a potent tool for activism. By challenging patriarchal norms and highlighting systemic injustices, feminist art seeks to subvert the phallogocentrism that governs cultural norms, including artistic expression, critiques existing structures and re-imagines possibilities for a more equitable society. Scholars such as Griselda Pollock (1988) and Lucy R. Lippard (1995) have underscored the transformative potential of feminist art, situating it as both a cultural critique and a call to action. Griselda Pollock, a pioneering voice in feminist art theory, argues that art does not exist in isolation but is deeply embedded within the social and historical contexts that shape it. Her concept of the feminist intervention in art's histories challenges traditional art historical narratives that privilege male creators and overlook the socio-political dimensions of women's artistic contributions (Pollock, 1988). This intervention is particularly significant in addressing economic inequality, as feminist artists foreground the systemic

undervaluation of women's labor, both in the domestic sphere and beyond. Similarly, Lucy R. Lippard's work further illuminates the relationship between feminist art and activism. Lippard emphasizes the subversive potential of art to disrupt dominant narratives and amplify marginalized voices. In her seminal text *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (1976), Lippard highlights how feminist artists in the 1970s began to use their art to critique economic and social injustices, employing nontraditional mediums and collaborative practices that resisted commodification. This ethos continues to inform contemporary feminist art, which often incorporates participatory elements to engage audiences in dialogues about inequality. One of the central themes in feminist art is the critique of unpaid care work, a concept that highlights the invisible labor performed by women in domestic and care-giving roles. Feminist economists, such as Marilyn Waring (1988), have critiqued how traditional economic systems exclude caregiving and domestic work from calculations of productivity and value. Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) further underscores how this labor, though essential to societal functioning, is systematically undervalued and excluded from economic metrics. Artists like Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Mary Kelly address this disparity through their work. Ukeles' *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* (1969) redefines maintenance tasks as artistic labor, challenging the cultural devaluation of reproductive labor and reclaiming its significance. Similarly, Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1976) explores the intimate yet overlooked dimensions of motherhood and unpaid labor, using personal and material archives to highlight the gendered dynamics of care. By elevating these themes to the realm of art, these works question why such labor remains marginalized in economic and artistic discourses. Another pivotal concept in feminist art is the glass ceiling, a metaphor for the invisible barriers that prevent women from advancing in professional and economic spheres. Feminist artists like Barbara Kruger and Andrea Bowers have critiqued these structural inequalities through their work. Kruger's iconic text-based pieces, such as *Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)* (1989), employ bold, confrontational language to interrogate power dynamics and

advocate for workplace equity. Meanwhile, Bowers uses multimedia installations to highlight the struggles of women's labor movements, emphasizing the collective fight against wage disparities and occupational segregation. These artistic interventions underscore the persistence of systemic barriers while inspiring resistance and solidarity. Economic marginalization, another key theme in feminist art, addresses how women are disproportionately affected by poverty, labor exploitation, and systemic disenfranchisement. Ana Teresa Fernández's performance art and paintings vividly portray the erasure of women's labor, particularly that of migrant workers, through acts of symbolic invisibility. Ana Teresa Fernández's *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)* (2011) series vividly portrays the erasure of women's labor, particularly that of migrant workers, through acts of symbolic invisibility. By painting sections of border walls to blend with the sky, Fernández challenges the barriers that marginalize women economically and socially. Similarly, Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1979) critiques the confinement of women to domestic spaces, using performative gestures to deconstruct the cultural and economic restrictions imposed on women. These works not only expose the systemic roots of women's economic marginalization but also advocate for transformative change. Art has long served as a tool for activism, enabling artists to critique societal injustices and imagine alternative futures. In the feminist context, art has bridged the personal and the political through visual and performative mediums. Historically, the feminist art movement of the 1970s sought to challenge the male-dominated art world and reclaim artistic spaces for women. Lucy R. Lippard's (1995) *The Pink Glass Swan* highlights how feminist artists of this era used their work to critique societal norms and advocate for gender equity. Feminist art historians, such as and Linda Nochlin and Griselda Pollock, continue to discuss the structural barriers that feminist artists face in a male-dominated art world. Nochlin's provocative question that entitles her seminal article published in 1971 "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" continues to resonate, highlighting the systemic marginalization of women's contributions to the art world. Pollock's (1988) *Vision and Difference* further situates feminist art within a broader

theoretical framework, emphasizing how art can destabilize hegemonic narratives and re-imagine possibilities for social justice. Contemporary feminist artists continue this legacy, employing new media such as digital platforms and interdisciplinary approaches to address global issues, including economic inequality, climate justice, and racial oppression. For example, the Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous collective of feminist artists formed in New York in 1985 to fight sexism and racism within art exemplify this approach, using humor and data-driven visuals to expose gender and racial disparities in the art world and beyond (Figure 1). Their work exemplifies how feminist art and activism transcends traditional boundaries, engaging diverse audiences and fostering critical dialogue



Figure 1- **Poster:** *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum?*, 1989, Guerrilla Girls.  
Source: Google Images, 2025.

Feminist art's engagement with economic inequality demonstrates its transformative potential. By exposing the systemic undervaluation of women's labor, critiquing structural barriers, and amplifying marginalized voices, feminist artists re-imagine the role of art in society. This theoretical framework sought not only to inform the analysis of feminist art but also to underscore its significance in broader struggles for social and economic justice.

## 2. Unpaid Labor and the Female Experience in Art

Unpaid domestic and care-giving labor, predominantly performed by women, has historically been excluded from formal economic metrics, rendering it invisible in discussions of productivity and societal value. Feminist art has emerged as a powerful medium to critique this erasure, bringing attention to the gendered dimensions of labor and reimagining its place within cultural and economic frameworks. Through the works of feminist artists such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Mary Kelly, the invisibility of unpaid labor is not only exposed but also redefined as a site of resistance and transformation. Feminist theorists, including Silvia Federici and Marilyn Waring, have long argued that unpaid domestic labor underpins capitalist economies by sustaining the workforce without receiving proper recognition or compensation. Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004) highlights how domestic labor has been systematically devalued, while Waring's *If Women Counted* (1988) critiques the exclusion of care-giving work from economic indicators like GDP. Feminist artists have echoed these critiques, using their practices to make the hidden dynamics of unpaid labor visible and to challenge traditional definitions of work.

### 2.1. Case Study 1: Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Invisible Labor

Mierle Laderman Ukeles's groundbreaking work, *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* (1969), redefines the boundaries of artistic practice by foregrounding the labor of maintenance as a critical subject of art. In her manifesto, Ukeles questions the hierarchical separation between creative and maintenance work, asserting that the latter is equally essential to the functioning of both society and the art world. Her manifesto declares, "Maintenance: keeps the dust off the pure individual creation; preserve the new; sustain the change; protect progress; defend and prolong the advance; renew the excitement; repeat the flight;" (in Philips, 2016). Written as both a critique of and a challenge to traditional art hierarchies, the manifesto also questions societal values that prioritize

production and creativity over maintenance and preservation. In the manifesto, Ukeles argues for the recognition of maintenance work as a vital and creative process, equating the labor involved in sustaining life and environments to artistic activity. She frames maintenance tasks as acts deserving of visibility and respect, thus challenging the gendered division of labor and the marginalization of domestic and care work, which are often associated with women. Thus, Ukeles' *Manifesto* not only exemplifies how feminist art has been addressing this issue but also redefines the concept of art. By elevating mundane, repetitive tasks such as cleaning and care-giving to the status of art, Ukeles exposes the cultural devaluation of these activities and their association with women's roles. The manifesto also served as a foundation for Ukeles' later performance art projects, such as her *Maintenance Art* series (1973), featuring the performance entitled *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Outside*, in which the artist publicly performed maintenance tasks in public spaces. During these performances, Ukeles scrubbed the front steps and the floor of the gallery, and the photos taken of these performances illustrate the artist washing the museum's stairs, which have since become iconic (Figure 2).



Figure 2- **Photographs of Performance Art: *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Outside*, 1973, Mierle Laderman Ukeles.**  
Source: Google Images, 2025.

Ukeles' *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object* (1973) is another performance piece that further explores her critique of societal attitudes toward maintenance work and the role of labor, often gendered, in the art world. In *Transfer*, Ukeles collaborated with the museum's cleaning staff to clean a large piece of Plexiglas. The performance involved several steps, symbolizing the invisible labor required to sustain and preserve art objects in institutional spaces (Figure 3). This piece also highlights the often-ignored labor of cleaners and maintenance workers, often women, in museums, questioning hierarchies of value that elevate creative production while marginalizing the work needed to preserve and sustain

it. By integrating maintenance labor into the gallery space, Ukeles drew attention to the interdependence between creation and preservation, challenging viewers to reconsider the boundaries of art and the social value of labor.



Figure 3- **Photograph of Performance Art:** *Transfer: The Maintenance of the Art Object*, 1973, Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

The artwork *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* (1973) presents a series of black-and-white photographs that depict the artist performing the everyday tasks of helping her children dress and undress (Figure 4). Notably, the final image in the sequence is left blank in the bottom right corner, symbolizing an unfinished narrative or the ongoing nature of caregiving labor. In the exhibition space, the artist included a cleaning rag and a chain alongside the photographs, inviting visitors to actively participate by using the rag to clean and maintain the artwork (Figure 5).



Figure 4- **Photographs:** *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In*, 1973, Mierle Laderman Ukeles.  
Source: Google Images, 2025.

From a feminist perspective, this piece highlights the often-invisible labor of care-giving and domestic work, tasks traditionally relegated to women and undervalued in both societal and artistic contexts. By leaving the final image blank, the artist emphasizes the repetitive and cyclical

nature of care work, challenging the perception of such labor as mundane or insignificant. The inclusion of the cleaning rag and the invitation for visitors to maintain the artwork blur the lines between viewer and participant, underscoring the shared responsibility for sustaining both art and life. This work critiques societal hierarchies that devalue maintenance and care-giving, reframing these acts as integral and worthy of recognition within both personal and public spheres.



Figure 5- **Photographs (detail):** *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In*, 1973, Mierle Laderman Ukeles.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

By elevating the mundane tasks of cleaning and care-giving to the realm of art, Ukeles challenges the cultural devaluation of reproductive labor and reclaims its significance. Through her work, Ukeles blurred the lines between art and life, emphasizing the value of repetitive, sustaining labor, often associated with and expected from women, as a form of creative expression and social critique.

## 2.2. Case Study 2: Mary Kelly and Unpaid Labor

Similarly, Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973-79) offers an intimate exploration of motherhood and unpaid care-giving labor, blending personal narrative with theoretical inquiry. The six-part series inclu-

des artifacts from her son's early years, such as feeding charts, diary entries, and used diaper liners, accompanied by psychoanalytic and linguistic analyses (Figure 6). This meticulous documentation of the mother-child relationship foregrounds the labor-intensive and often invisible work of care-giving.



Figure 6- **Photograph of Installation:** *Post-Partum Document*, 1976,  
Mary Kelly.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

Kelly's work challenges traditional representations of motherhood as a natural or instinctive role by framing it as a form of labor shaped by social and economic structures. Influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, *Post-Partum Document* interrogates how maternal labor is intertwined with identity formation, both for the mother and the child. As art critic and curator Helena Reckitt (2012) notes in *Art and Feminism*, *Post-Partum Document* engages with Lacanian and Freudian theories of sexual difference to create a conceptual space for redefining the maternal experience. By using her son's diapers as visual traces of the continuity and discontinuity between creator/mother and object/child, Kelly reinterprets motherhood as a site of both personal and theoretical exploration, offering a feminist critique of conventional artistic and cultural narratives. Besides, by presenting care-giving artifacts as art objects, Kelly also subverts

conventional definitions of artistic value and productivity, emphasizing the intellectual and emotional dimensions of unpaid labor. Works such as those by Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Marry Kelly undoubtedly bring visibility to the gendered dynamics of labor and care, questioning why such labor remains marginalized in economic and artistic discourses. Ukeles's *Maintenance Art* series redefines labor by blurring the boundaries between art and everyday life. Her emphasis on maintenance tasks as artistic practice critiques the art world's preoccupation with the finished product and elevates processes of care as vital forms of creative expression. Similarly, Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* challenges the commodification of art by emphasizing the relational and process-oriented nature of care-giving work. Her use of personal and ephemeral materials underscores the transient yet profound impact of unpaid labor on individual and collective identity. Both Ukeles and Kelly disrupt traditional definitions of labor that privilege productivity in capitalist terms while marginalizing activities associated with care and maintenance. Their works reclaim unpaid domestic and care-giving labor as sites of creativity, intellectual engagement, and social critique. By situating these activities within the realm of art, they challenge the cultural and economic hierarchies that devalue women's work. Carol Hanisch's essay, "The Personal Is Political", first published in the 1969 volume *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation* (1970), introduced the idea that women's political and social struggles are intrinsically tied to their individual identities, emphasizing how systemic economic oppression by governments and institutions disproportionately affects women. This concept resonates in works such as *Dressing to Go Out/Undressing to Go In* and *Post-Partum Document*, in which the artists critique economic systems that exploit women's physical labor, transforming personal narratives into broader political statements. These pieces exemplify how feminist art can serve as a platform to question and resist the systemic structures that marginalize women's experiences and labor. The works of Ukeles and Kelly resonate with broader feminist critiques of economic systems that marginalize women's contributions. By making unpaid labor visible and reinterpreting it as a form of artistic and intellectual practice, these artists challenge the structural ine-

qualities that sustain gendered divisions of labor. Their art not only critiques existing systems but also imagines alternative frameworks in which care and maintenance are recognized as fundamental to social and economic well-being. Through their innovative approaches, Ukeles and Kelly expand the possibilities of feminist art, demonstrating its capacity to engage with complex socio-economic issues. By addressing the invisibility of unpaid labor, their works contribute to a broader movement for gender equity and economic justice, inspiring both critical reflection and collective action.

### **3. The Glass Ceiling and Gendered Spaces**

Feminist art has been a powerful medium to critique and expose the structural barriers women face in professional spaces, including the pervasive issues of unequal pay, underrepresentation in leadership roles, and systemic discrimination. The concept of the glass ceiling—a metaphor for the invisible yet impenetrable barrier preventing women from ascending to positions of power and influence and reaching leadership roles or achieving equal pay—has been a focal point of feminist discourse. Feminist artists have employed diverse forms of expression to interrogate these inequities, using visual language to highlight societal structures that perpetuate gendered professional inequality. By addressing themes of workplace inequality, feminist art not only critiques the structures that perpetuate these disparities but also advocates for systemic change. The term glass ceiling emerged in the 1980s to describe the systemic obstacles that hinder women's advancement in professional hierarchies. Despite decades of advocacy for workplace equality, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles and are often paid less than their male counterparts for equivalent work. Feminist artists have used their platforms to critique these disparities, creating works that challenge the normalization of gendered inequity in professional spaces. By doing so, they not only expose the structural nature of these barriers but also advocate for transformative change.

### 3.1 Case Study 3: Barbara Kruger and Politics of Power

Barbara Kruger's work exemplifies how feminist art interrogates power dynamics and professional inequities. Her iconic piece *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)* (1989) addresses broader issues of gendered power but also resonates within professional contexts. The bold text and striking imagery challenge societal norms, emphasizing the control exerted over women's bodies and choices (Figure 7). While this particular piece primarily critiques reproductive rights, its commentary on power structures extends to professional spaces, where women's autonomy is similarly constrained. Kruger's use of direct, confrontational language forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about societal hierarchies, highlighting the commodification of women's bodies and the ways in which societal structures prioritize male dominance. The artist's use of commercial aesthetics—bold typography and stark contrasts—mimics advertising, a field often dominated by patriarchal narratives, thereby subverting its techniques from within to critique the very systems it supports. Her text-based pieces, which juxtapose stark phrases against monochromatic imagery, create a visual language of resistance. By drawing attention to the ways in which women's contributions are undervalued and their autonomy constrained, Kruger's art underscores the systemic nature of professional inequities and emphasizes the need for women to combat the system that restricts them.



Figure 7- **Photographic Silkscreen on Vinyl: *Untitled (Your Body is a Battleground)***, 1989, Barbara Kruger.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

### 3.2. Case Study 4: Andrea Bowers and Activism in Art

Andrea Bowers employs her art to amplify activism around workplace equity, focusing on issues such as labor rights and wage gaps (Figure 8). Her installations often incorporate multimedia elements, blending historical documentation, textual analysis, and visual art to create compelling narratives about systemic inequality. Through her work, Bowers amplifies the voices of activists and workers who have fought for gender parity and labor rights. She intentionally works with nontraditional mediums, embracing materials like vinyl and graphite, which have historically been undervalued as economically cheaper and feminized art forms. This approach aligns with the feminist art movement of the 1970s and 1980s, during which many artists rejected traditional oil painting in favor of alternative materials to better represent political narratives. A feminist and social activist, Bowers uses her art to engage with pressing political issues, including sexism, immigration, environmental justice, and the rights of women and workers, situating these themes within the broader framework

of American history and protest movements. Her work draws attention to the intersection of gender and economic exploitation, addressing issues of the systemic undervaluation of women's labor, often in marginalized communities. Her work underscores the importance of collective action, emphasizing that systemic change requires solidarity across different identities and professions.



Figure 8- **Colored Pencil on Paper: Womxn Workers of the World Unite!**, 2016, [detail], Andrea Bowers.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

One of Bowers' significant projects, *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)* (2010), although primarily focused on immigration and labor exploitation, also critiques broader issues of systemic inequity, including those faced by women. The 10-foot high, 23-panel mural/drawings features the names and surnames of thousands of people known to have died while crossing the U.S. and Mexican border, many of whom were women and children (Figure 9). Her work often highlights the intersectionality of struggles, addressing how race, class, and gender collectively shape experiences of inequality. Bowers' commitment to showcasing real-life stories and grassroots activism situates her art within a larger framework of social justice, emphasizing the collective fight against various forms of discrimination, including sexism.



Figure 9- **Photograph of Installation:** *No Olvidado (Not Forgotten)*, 2010, Andrea Bowers.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

These artistic interventions align with broader feminist critiques of inequality, including professional experiences. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2013) and bell hooks (1984) have highlighted how systemic inequities in professional spaces are not merely economic but also deeply embedded cultural and social. Fraser's concept of participatory parity—the idea that all individuals should have equal opportunities to participate in social life—is particularly relevant here. Feminist art, by exposing and challenging the barriers to such parity, becomes a tool for envisioning a more inclusive and equitable society. Similarly, hooks' critique of white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy underscores the need for intersectional approaches to addressing professional inequality. The works of Kruger and Bowers reflect these theoretical insights, emphasizing the interconnectedness of gender, race, and class in shaping professional experiences. Moreover, these artistic critiques extend beyond the boundaries of the art world, influencing broader cultural and political discourses. For example, Kruger's work has been featured in public spaces, advertisements, and even protest signs, demonstrating its resonance with contemporary feminist movements. Similarly, Bowers' collaborations with activists and labor organizations further illustrate how feminist art can transcend traditional boundaries, becoming a catalyst for social change. By engaging with real-world struggles, the work of these artists demonstrate the transformative potential of feminist art to challenge inequities and envision a

more just future. Thus, artists like Kruger and Bowers connect their critiques to broader societal issues, illustrating how inequality is deeply rooted in patriarchal and capitalist structures. The systemic barriers are not merely individual challenges but reflect a culture that prioritizes profit and power over equity and inclusivity. For instance, the persistent wage gap—where women earn significantly less than their male counterparts—is emblematic of the structural inequities feminist artists seek to dismantle. By addressing these issues, Kruger and Bowers situate their work within a tradition of feminist activism that seeks not only to critique but also to transform gendered spaces. Moreover, the artistic strategies employed by Kruger and Bowers also reflect the diversity of feminist approaches to activism. Kruger's work relies on visual immediacy, using bold, declarative statements to provoke viewers into questioning societal norms. Her critique of professional spaces being gendered is implicit but powerful, as her works demand recognition of the systemic forces that shape women's experiences. In contrast, Bowers' art is more overtly activist, often incorporating real-world events and movements into her art. By documenting protests, strikes, and other forms of resistance, Bowers bridges the gap between art and activism, illustrating how feminist critique can inspire tangible change. By addressing these themes, feminist artists contribute to a larger discourse on social justice, emphasizing the need for systemic transformation. Their works serve as both a mirror and a catalyst, reflecting societal inequities while inspiring action toward a more equitable future.

#### **4. Poverty and Women's Economic Marginalization**

Poverty and economic marginalization disproportionately affect women, often stemming from systemic inequities in labor markets, domestic roles, and access to resources. Feminist artists have long confronted these issues, using their work to expose and highlight the pervasive economic marginalization of women, particularly their struggles with poverty, homelessness, and labor exploitation. Through evocative imagery, performative interventions, and other innovative techniques, these artists ad-

dress structural inequities and challenge societal indifference to women's economic hardships. By situating their art within the broader feminist critique of economic systems, they not only highlight the systemic roots of poverty but also foster empathy and mobilize social change. Women disproportionately face economic marginalization due to systemic barriers such as wage inequality, labor exploitation, and unpaid care work. Feminist theorists, including hooks (1984) and Federici (2004), have argued that women's poverty is a product of intersecting oppressions rooted in patriarchy, capitalism, and racism. Federici's analysis in *Caliban and the Witch*, for instance, underscores how the exploitation of women's labor has historically served as the foundation of capitalist economies (2004). Feminist artists, drawing from these critiques, have created works that visualize the often invisible or ignored economic struggles of women, using art as a powerful vehicle for advocacy and awareness.

#### **4.1. Case Study 5: Ana Teresa Fernández and Labor Exploitation**

Ana Teresa Fernández's work vividly portrays the economic marginalization of women, particularly migrant laborers, by addressing themes of invisibility, exploitation, and resilience. Her series *Borrando la Frontera* (Erasing the Border) (2011/2013) is emblematic of her approach, blending art and activism to critique the systemic barriers that oppress women. Fernández's performance piece features the artist herself in a black cocktail dress and heels, symbolically painting sections of the U.S. and Mexico border wall sky blue, creating the illusion of an open sky (Figure 10). As part of this project, the artist also documents her installations and performances by using painting and photography (Figure 11). This act of symbolic defiance highlights the physical and metaphorical borders that perpetuate economic inequality and marginalize women, especially those in migrant and undocumented communities. The artist's work reveals how women's bodies function as canvas imprinted with ideologies, and by using of her own body in her works, Fernández underscores the personal and collective struggles of women caught in cycles of economic exploitation. By visually blending into the landscape, her art critiques the

invisibility of migrant labor while calling for solidarity and systemic change.



Figure 10- **Photograph of Performance:** *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)*, 2011, Ana Teresa Fernández.

Source: Google Images, 2025.



Figure 11- **Painting Oil on Canvas:** *Borrando la Frontera (Erasing the Border)*, 2013, Ana Teresa Fernández.

Thus, Fernández's work addresses the exploitation of women's labor within oppressive systems. Her art often depicts women engaged in acts

of physical labor, their bodies obscured or partially erased to signify the erasure of their contributions from public recognition. By focusing on the experiences of women who work in precarious and undervalued conditions, Fernández challenges audiences to confront the systemic dehumanization of women laborers. Her art underscores the resilience of these women while critiquing the structures that exploit their bodies and labor.

#### 4.2. Case Study 6: Martha Rosler and Domestic Labor

Martha Rosler's video performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) offers a sharp critique of domesticity and its economic constraints imposed on women. In this six-minute video performance, Rosler stands in a kitchen and methodically demonstrates the use of various utensils, naming each one with increasing aggression (Figure 12). The alphabetized presentation of the utensils—from apron to zester—underscores the monotony and dehumanization of domestic work, which has historically been undervalued and disproportionately assigned to women. Her deadpan demeanor and exaggerated gestures transform the kitchen tools into symbols of confinement, highlighting how domestic spaces and labor have historically restricted women's economic and personal freedom. While the performance may appear humorous on the surface, its underlying critique of the economic and social structures that confine women to domestic roles is deeply political. By subverting the expectations of kitchen demonstrations, Rosler highlights the intersection of poverty, domesticity, and economic marginalization.



Figure 11- **Film Stills of Performance Art:** *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975, Martha Rosler.

Source: Google Images, 2025.

Rosler's work thus critiques the capitalist commodification of domestic labor and its gendered implications. By presenting the kitchen as a site of both oppression and resistance, she calls attention to the economic undervaluation of women's domestic contributions. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* also challenges traditional narratives of domesticity as a space of nurturing and creativity, instead revealing its latent frustrations and limitations. This critique extends to the broader economic systems that rely on women's unpaid domestic labor to sustain capitalist production. The power of feminist art lies in its ability to evoke empathy and inspire action. By humanizing the struggles of economically marginalized women, artists like Fernández and Rosler create a sense of urgency around systemic inequities. Fernández's visually striking works compel viewers to confront the human cost of economic exploitation and migration policies, creating space for dialogue and action, and invites audiences to imagine a world without barriers, fostering solidarity with marginalized communities. Ros-

ler's satirical yet incisive critique of domestic labor likewise exposes the systemic undervaluation of women's contributions, challenging audiences to reconsider societal norms around gender and work and prompting critical reflections on the economic structures that confine women. By addressing these issues and making visible the invisible labor and struggles of women, both artists reveal the interconnectedness of poverty, gender, and economic systems, emphasizing the need for structural reform and compelling their audiences to consider the broader implications of economic inequality, advocating for systemic change. Their works transcend aesthetic appeal, serving as calls to action that challenge viewers to confront their own complicity in perpetuating these systems. The power of art to evoke empathy lies in its ability to transcend data and statistics, presenting human experiences in ways that resonate emotionally and intellectually. For example, Fernández's depiction of labor exploitation allows viewers to visualize the physical and psychological toll of these conditions, fostering a sense of urgency for change. Similarly, Rosler's performance invites audiences to question their own complicity in maintaining domestic and economic hierarchies, encouraging self-reflection and collective action. Through their work, these feminist artists challenge societal apathy, transforming abstract issues of poverty and marginalization into tangible and urgent concerns. Moreover, these artistic interventions align with broader feminist critiques of economic marginalization. Federici's (2004) analysis of domestic labor emphasizes the historical devaluation of women's work as foundational to capitalist economies. Fernández's and Rosler's works echo this critique, highlighting the structural forces that perpetuate economic inequities. Similarly, Collins' (1990) concept of the matrix of domination underscores how intersections of race, class, and gender shape women's experiences of poverty, a theme evident in Fernández's focus on migrant laborers. In conclusion, feminist art addressing women's economic marginalization underscores the transformative potential of creative expression to critique systemic injustices and promote social change. Through works like Fernández's and Rosler's, feminist artists expose the structural roots of poverty and labor exploitation while celebrating the resilience of women. By fostering empathy and

mobilizing action, these artists demonstrate that art can be a powerful tool in the fight for economic justice and gender equity.

## 5. Conclusion: Feminist Art as a Catalyst for Change

Feminist art has established itself as a transformative medium for critiquing economic inequality and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities of women. By addressing themes such as unpaid labor, professional barriers, and economic marginalization, feminist artists have highlighted the systemic inequities that perpetuate gendered economic disparities, challenged entrenched societal norms, and redefined the scope of artistic practice. The works examined in this article—spanning Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ *Maintenance Art*, Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document*, Barbara Kruger’s iconic text-based critiques, Andrea Bowers’ activism-driven installations, Ana Teresa Fernández’s explorations of labor exploitation, and Martha Rosler’s deconstruction of domesticity—demonstrate the power of art to interrogate systemic injustices and inspire dialogue. Through these case studies, several key findings emerge. First, feminist art critiques the invisibility of women’s labor, particularly unpaid care-giving and domestic work. By elevating these often-overlooked contributions to the level of artistic discourse, works like Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* and Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* challenge traditional definitions of labor and productivity. These pieces underscore the value of care work, urging society to recognize its economic and emotional significance. Second, feminist art exposes the structural barriers women face in professional spaces, as seen in Barbara Kruger’s and Andrea Bowers’ work. By addressing themes such as the glass ceiling, workplace inequities, and wage disparities, these artists critique the systemic limitations imposed on women’s career advancement. Their art serves not only as a reflection of these issues but also as a rallying call for collective resistance and reform. Third, feminist artists like Ana Teresa Fernández and Martha Rosler highlight the intersectional nature of economic marginalization, emphasizing how poverty, migration, and labor exploitation

disproportionately affect women, particularly women of color and immigrant populations. Their works evoke empathy and challenge viewers to reconsider their assumptions about economic systems and societal hierarchies, demonstrating the potential of art to provoke critical reflection and inspire action. Together, these works exemplify how feminist art can both reflect societal inequalities and challenge audiences to envision alternative futures. The power of art as activism lies in its ability to bridge the personal and the political, transcending traditional methods of advocacy and communication by transforming individual experiences into universal calls for justice. By engaging with themes of economic inequality, feminist artists compel audiences to confront uncomfortable truths and envision alternative futures. Visual and performance art evoke emotional and intellectual responses, making complex social issues more accessible and compelling. Moreover, feminist art's emphasis on collaboration and participatory practices aligns with broader feminist principles of inclusivity and collective action. These works illustrate how art can create a space for dialogue and reflection, encouraging viewers to reconsider entrenched norms and values. However, the limitations of art as activism must also be acknowledged. While art can spark dialogue and raise awareness, its ability to effect systemic change is often constrained by institutional and societal structures. The reach of feminist art is often constrained by its reliance on institutional support and access to audiences who may already be sympathetic to its messages. Moreover, the commodification of art in capitalist economies can dilute its radical potential, as works critical of economic inequality are often displayed and sold within the very systems they critique. Additionally, the accessibility of feminist art may be limited by geographic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers, potentially excluding the very communities it seeks to represent and empower. The evolving landscape of feminist art presents exciting opportunities for further research and exploration. One promising avenue is the rise of digital feminist art, which leverages social media and online platforms to reach global audiences and foster grassroots activism. Digital art's immediacy and interactivity offer new possibilities for engaging with economic

inequality and amplifying marginalized voices in unprecedented ways. Furthermore, intersectional perspectives on economic inequality warrant deeper investigation. While feminist art has made significant strides in addressing issues of gender and labor, future research could further explore the intersections of race, class, sexuality, and ability. By embracing an intersectional lens, feminist art can more comprehensively address the multifaceted nature of economic injustice and ensure that its critiques and solutions are inclusive. Besides, exploring the role of collective and community-based art projects could deepen our understanding of how feminist art functions as a catalyst for change. Initiatives that prioritize collaboration and grassroots engagement may offer alternative models for addressing economic inequality, emphasizing solidarity and shared agency over individual expression. These approaches align with broader feminist goals of dismantling hierarchical structures and promoting inclusivity. In conclusion, feminist art stands as a powerful catalyst for change, challenging societal norms and advocating for a more equitable world. By exposing systemic inequities, critiquing economic inequality, and amplifying marginalized voices, feminist artists continue to push the boundaries of artistic practice and activism, challenging audiences to confront uncomfortable truths and envision more equitable futures. While the path toward systemic change remains complex and fraught with challenges, the enduring legacy of feminist art underscores its transformative potential and reaffirms its vital role in the ongoing struggle for social justice.

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