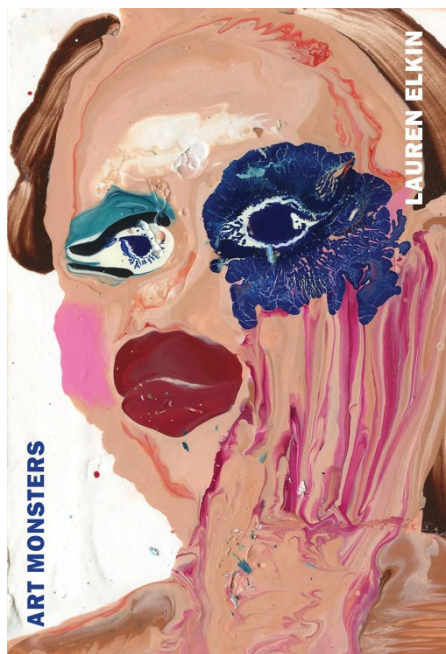


BOOK REVIEW:

Lauren Elkin, *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art*, Vintage, 2024, 368 p.



Do Women Have to be Naked to Get Into the Met. Museum? asks, in 1989, one of the most representative posters of the feminist group Guerilla Girls (1985–present). The message, accompanied by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Grande Odalisque* (1814), but with a gorilla mask covering the face, is meant to emphasize the hypocrisy of art institutions, such as museums, that have no problem with exhibiting thousands of nude paintings of women, but still shy away from promoting female artists.

The Guerilla Girls weren't the only ones, not even the first ones concerned with issues centered around female representation, but also POC (people of colour) representation, in the art world. Starting from as early as the 1960s, the second wave of feminism quickly began to spread

its ideology regarding gender equality and the need to fight against discrimination—not only towards women, but also towards POC, the LGBTQ+ community, certain religions, disabled people, and so on. Feminism became the main topic of many theorists, such as Linda Nochlin (1931–2017), Luce Irigaray (b. 1930), Hélène Cixous (b. 1937), Catherine Clément (b. 1939), Griselda Pollock (b. 1949) or Laura

Mulvey (b. 1941), and it also inspired a significant number of female artists to create works based on their own experience as women—which leads us to the main topic of the book I am about to present.

Called the “Susan Sontag of her generation” by poet Deborah Levy (b. 1959), Lauren Elkin (b. 1978) is a French-American writer and awarded translator, known for her essays on themes such as culture, art, and literature. Her most notable book up until this moment, titled *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art* (2023), outlines a veritable anthology of feminist literature and art, with the main focus being on the way the female body is seen and represented. While the book itself is divided into three chapters (“monster theory”, “professions for women”, “bodies of work”), its structure doesn’t necessarily follow a linear or chronological narrative thread, a choice voluntarily made by the author: “For me, this book is as much an experiment in critical form as it is a feminist intervention in conversations about female embodiment and representation. [...] It is purposefully un-disciplined, anti-disciplinary ...” (p. 65). In my opinion, this decision, amongst others that I will present along the way, is one of the reasons why Elkin’s work opens a new page in the field of feminist criticism in our current era.

Because of how the book is organized, it would be difficult to give a proper summary for each chapter, which is why I think it would be more productive to highlight, instead, the main concepts and ideas that Lauren Elkin presents throughout her writing, starting with the one we can see in the main title and which represents the basis of the entire book—*art monster*. The use of Genieve Figgis’ painting *Blue Eyeliner* (2020) on the cover couldn’t be more fitting for this specific syntagma: an unconventional portrait of a woman, all smudged, as if she just pressed her entire face on the canvas; her makeup is everything but subtle—striking shades of blue around her eyes, a dark-toned red on her lips, and a Barbie pink blush on her cheeks. The contour of her face is imprecise and wobbly—she is, as Elkin would say, “uncontainable” (p. 15).

That being said, the *art monster* (which, in the author’s vision, can be used both as a noun and as a verb) is meant to guide us outside of what is considered to be the norm in a patriarchal society, and to teach us how to appreciate the beauty that is found within ourselves, even if it doesn’t fit in a specific mold (p. 14). This is the part where feminist art comes into play, more specifically the one from the ‘70s and the ‘80s, when women artists show no restraints or shame in portraying female bodies and everything associated with them and often stigmatized.

Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019), Ana Mendieta (1948–1985), Eva Hesse (1936–1970), Helen Chadwick (1953–1996), Hannah Wilke (1940–1993), and Kathy Acker (1947–1997)—all of them were *art monsters* that were no longer able to contain themselves, so they started to take up as much space as

they could. Whether we are talking about Mendieta marking the earth with the outline of her body and then setting it on fire, about Wilke flaunting her naked body in front of the camera, both before and after her cancer diagnosis, about Hesse handling large industrial material as a way to “retreat from language” (p. 221), what we are actually seeing is not only women artists acknowledging their presence in the art space, but also them making sure everybody else acknowledges it too.

Another element that profoundly inspired Elkin throughout the process of writing this book, and is mentioned recurrently up until the last page, is the work of novelist Virginia Woolf (1882–1941), whose speech from 1931, also known as *Professions for Women*, argued that, in order for a woman to make a name for herself in a world dominated by men, she must destroy, but also build. Connected to Woolf and also mentioned in *Art Monsters* are photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), her great-aunt, and painter Vanessa Bell (1879–1961), her sister, both great examples of modern women artists that deconstructed their works in a manner that turned them into true pieces of art.

As I have mentioned before, feminism doesn’t revolve only around women, and Lauren Elkin’s book makes no exception when it comes to the diverse groups that this ideology wants to represent. Kara Walker (b. 1969), Sutapa Biswas (b. 1962), Claudette Johnson (b. 1959), Betye Saar (b. 1926), and Lorna Simpson (b. 1960) are some of the artists that channel in their works both the hardships of their ancestors and their own struggles as women of colour in a society that sometimes seems to value a person less only because of the tone of their skin. Sculptor Judith Scott (1943–2005), on the other hand, was deaf and had Down Syndrome—after being outcasted by her own family for more than thirty years just because of her disability, Scott managed to transform her loneliness and pain into art, by creating textile sculptures where all the elements are tightly bound together, giving her the closeness she needed when she was a child.

Just like feminism in general, Lauren Elkin’s book might receive some raised eyebrows or even eyerolls, as it might be considered too “aggressive”, too “indecent”, because of the use of non-academic language and pictures of naked bodies—but focusing only on these elements would just oversimplify her work. *Art Monsters* touches on really serious topics, such as racism, assault, loss, sickness or death, all approached with nothing but respect by Elkin, who shows a deep connection with and understanding of each artist she writes about. More than that, as an author, she is not afraid to objectively present facts, but also express her own opinion, sometimes in a veiled manner, on the subject matter.

It’s safe to say that *Art Monsters* is not for everyone. First of all, I would say this book might be more fitting for those that already have some knowledge about contemporary art and are looking for a more in-depth analysis, especially about feminist art—after all, it is the main topic. Second of all, I advise anyone

who is intrigued by this book and wishes to read it, to do it with an open mind and with respect for the women that were not afraid to be both art and artist. As for me, someone who is particularly interested in feminist art, I personally enjoyed Elkin's work—reading it was an immersive experience and it only made me more appreciative, but also more aware, of the way I am making my body my own.

Timea-Andrada TOTH

Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania
E-mail: timea.andrada@yahoo.com