



A 2014 poster designed by Cindy Rehm, from the "Gallery Tally" project, initiated by Micol Hebron.

# FEMINISTS

by Andrea Bowers

WHEN I WAS first asked to write a Muse column, in which an artist discusses a source of inspiration, frankly, I was annoyed by the topic. It serves up the old cliché. Media critic and blogger Anita Sarkeesian nails it in *Tropes vs. Women: #1 The Manic Pixie Dream Girl* (2011), the first of a six-part video series created for *Bitch* magazine's website:

We should talk about this whole idea of a muse, which is the foundation for this trope. For centuries male filmmakers, writers, painters, artists of all kinds have often cited women as the inspiration for their brilliant masterpieces. I swear if I hear one more story like this I'm going to scream. Or puke. Or both. Women are not here for men's inspiration or celebration or whatever else. We are musicians and artists and writers with our own brilliant and creative endeavors.

For this column, I am writing about feminists who inspire me because of their own brilliant and creative endeavors. Following

such criteria, I could write a book, so I include here only a few examples of the women who are affecting my mind and my heart right now. These people make me a better artist.

FANTANI TOURÉ is a princess with a weapon: her voice. She is from one of the founding families of Bamako, the capital of Mali. Touré was forbidden to sing because of her social status. Yet she insisted on singing as a young girl and is now one of the most recognized vocalists in Mali. There was a time when, because of her singing, her husband divorced her and she was forced into hiding. Not only has she broken this cultural ban, but she also writes lyrics about violence against women in her country and the need for change. She is perhaps the most courageous woman I have ever met.

In addition, Touré is one of the most significant feminist activists of our times. Her activism emerges from her personal experiences and those of the women in her community. Genital mutilation is a tradition in Mali. It's a brutal procedure performed on young women by other women for the equivalent of \$4. Polygamy is culturally accepted in her country, and she has seen

girls as young as 13 and 14 forced into marriages, which resulted in pregnancies that were severely painful, both emotionally and physically. In 1997, she founded the feminist association Kolomba, which aims to eradicate genital mutilation and forced marriage of young girls in Mali. This organization trains women to make crafts, so the income derived from the knife is replaced by art. The organization offers a sanctuary for many women. Right now there are over 70 members in Bamako. To strengthen her fight for women's rights, Touré created a sister organization, Kolomba France, in Aubervilliers, a town to the northeast of Paris. Both Kolomba Mali and Kolomba France hold a festival in their respective locales with concerts, conferences and workshops that address these taboo issues. Not only does Touré change the lives of women in her immediate community, but she also strives for constitutional change to protect women's rights.

NANCY BUCHANAN, a California feminist artist of the second wave, is my political lighthouse. Her practice is a brilliant synthesis of art and activism. She combines political astuteness with uncompromising ethics like no other artist I know, maintaining a belief in the power of protest and the necessity of organizing to facilitate change. Her early performance works are iconic and at times wickedly funny. In *Please Sing Along*, performed at the Woman's Building in L.A. in 1974, Buchanan and Barbara T. Smith investigated power and beauty through the reversal of male and female roles. The performance begins with naked men dancing whimsically to soothing music. Next, the two women, wearing what appear to be martial arts uniforms, beat the tar out of each other, while male voices read a collage of critical essays discussing essentialism. My other favorite,



*Rock 'n' Roll Piece* (1974), began with Buchanan selling raffle tickets. The night of the raffle, wearing a blond wig and false eyelashes, Buchanan performed a song whose lyrics came from the Union Oil Company of California's annual report to shareholders, with the band Blue Cheer accompanying her. She then had blood drawn from her arm, stepped to the microphone and announced that two raffle winners had each received four shares of Union Oil stock that she inherited from her family. She signed over the stock certificates using her own blood. In February 2013, REDCAT in L.A. presented a survey of Buchanan's videos dating from the 1970s to 2009. This screening powerfully influenced my work. Her videos have poetry, humor, quirky aesthetics and a consistency of political voice, all of which undermine the art world's celebration of big budgets and high production values. It's ridiculous that Buchanan isn't having solo museum shows. After fighting oppression for years she's still optimistic about possibilities and supportive of young artists.

MICOL HEBRON is a feminist tornado: performing, curating, writing, teaching, speaking and maintaining social and studio practices. She confounds me with her intelligence, her energetic multitasking and her commitment to engaging large groups of people in collaborations. Uniting feminist ideas from the materialists and essentialists, she might find a way for us all to get along in this very fractured feminist movement. As her work grows, she becomes increasingly adamant about rejecting object-making—which I admire but can't do. In 2004, she founded L.A. Art Girls, a critique and support group that encompassed over 30 women artists at its height and continues to this day. Currently Hebron is working on the "Gallery Tally" project, a compilation of data on the ratios of female and male artists in contemporary art galleries internationally. She accomplishes this through a Facebook group that contains over 1,300 members and with a Google Doc that lists gallery statistics. Artists participating in "Gallery Tally" have made over 350 posters and acquired information from galleries in about 20 cities and 10 countries. ○

Andrea Bowers: #justiceforjanedoe, Anonymous Women Protestors, Steubenville Rape Case, March 13-17, 2013 (detail), 2014, graphite on paper, 32½ by 25 inches overall. Courtesy Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects.

Two views of Nancy Buchanan's performance *Please Sing Along*, Mar. 2, 1974; at the Woman's Building, Los Angeles. Photos Boris Sojka.