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Reclaiming Adolescent Sexuality: Images of Girlhood in Petra Collins’s *Babe*

B*abe* is a collection of images created by female artists (and one man) including various art forms: photographs, drawings, paintings, collages, notes and others. This anthology, published by Prestel in 2015, was edited by Petra Collins, a young feminist Canadian photographer. The work of thirty international artists is an exploration of the adolescent identity, body and sexuality from a female perspective. The book can be read as an attempt to challenge the male-dominated art world, and give young women an opportunity to decide about their own image. *Babe* is an extension of Collins’s internet project – The Ardorous, a website (<http://www.theardorous.com/>) initiated in 2010. The latter was created to give young artists an opportunity to present their work, and constitute a network for other women like her.¹ Several works included in *Babe* were originally presented on The Ardorous website, some of them appeared online on different platforms: the photo sharing service Instagram or the microblogging platform Tumblr. The fact that collected images are the pictures women took themselves and decided to present – allowing them to decide what they want to share – adds an important dimension, and gives the artists control over their artwork. This paper explores how young women’s self-produced images can be understood as a feminist answer to a male-dominated art scene and an opportunity for girls to decide about their own image. I examine *Babe* as a celebration of girlhood and

¹ In introduction to *Babe* Collins (2015) states about The Ardorous: “I wanted to create a space for girls like me to show their work and connect with one another” (Collins, 2015, p. 9).

The study was conducted at author's own expense.

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womanhood, analyze its aesthetics, focusing on the use of the color pink and excessive girlishness. I also present the possible reading of the anthology as a feminist visual manifesto, in reference to the Riot Grrrl movement and the girl power phenomenon. I analyze how artists in *Babe* challenge figures of femininity, images of female body, and expressions of girls' sensuality.

Artists in *Babe* use different mediums and techniques to examine similar issues: a great majority of the artworks directly discusses representations of girlhood, femininity and sexuality. The artworks include photographs of girls with visible period blood on the underwear, to-do list with goals such as reclaiming the word "slut," series of photographs of girls taking selfies, paintings of disfigured characters from the *Sailor Moon* anime series, and confessions written with colorful markers. One of the artists, Madelyne Beckles, offers readers a glimpse of girls' thoughts by presenting a screenshot of her search history (which includes "80s female anthems," "sad quotes" and "calories in zucchini").² *Babe* appears to be a celebration of girlhood and womanhood: it is a book not only created by female artists (with one exception), but also about young women and girls. Men are almost non-existent in the artwork: if they are present, they are portrayed as either dominated by women (sometimes literally, like in Mike and Claire's work, where three women walk and stomp over a lying man³), queer or not traditionally masculine. This queerness is best visible in Claire Milbrath's drawings; Milbrath is the only artists in *Babe* who portrays both men and women, and her art includes drawings of a man with a dildo on his head, two men taking a bath together, or a man lying with a rose on a pink, heart-shaped bed.⁴ I read the omission of male characters in *Babe* as a glorification of girls' identity which does not position itself in relation to men.

Babe's color scheme can be quickly associated with almost infantile girlishness. The book's pages are pink, blue and yellow, and the pastel pink cover of the album resembles a high-school yearbook: the white title is surrounded by hand signatures of the contributors, some of them followed by a simple drawing of a heart or a smiling face. The majority of the whole book is overtly "girly" in its aesthetics: heavy use of pink color, stickers or glitter is not unusual. The overabundance of pink color is probably one of the most easily noticeable characteristics of *Babe*: both in the design of the book, and in the included

² Madelyne Beckles, *Herstory and Herstory II*, 2014 (Collins, 2015, p. 22).

³ Mike + Claire, *Boy with Heels*, 2014 (Collins, 2015, pp. 108–109).

⁴ Claire Milbrath, selected works from the series *Casual Encounters*, 2014, pencil and pen on paper (Collins, 2015, pp. 114–119).

artworks (see for example photographs by Mayan Toledano or Maisie Cousins). In “‘Not just a colour’: Pink as a gender and sexuality marker in visual communication” Veronika Koller (2008) studies associations with the color pink in Great Britain, yet her observations can be useful in examination of the work of international artists in *Babe*. Koller stresses that “visual texts often use pink to combine femininity and sexuality” (2008, p. 413) and observes that pink also works as an indicator of girlhood: “pink is cognitively and affectively linked to a feminine identity at an early age” (2008, p. 411). Koller continues: “pink artefacts may offer an escape to the allegedly less burdened days of girlhood” (2008, p. 411). Several photographs in *Babe* are an example of juxtaposing these two meanings of the color: the pictures blend sexuality with the innocence associated with early girlhood. Maisie Cousins’s photography serves as a perfect example of that practice: all of her photographs are saturated with the color pink, some of them seemingly innocent, yet very sexual. One of the erotic images – with the allusive title *What girls are made of 1* – depicts stomach and loins of a young girl, laying in magenta-colored water, wearing only pale fuchsia pants.⁵ The following photograph is a reference to the tradition of using flowers as symbols of female genitalia, with imaginable turn: the pink flower is sprinkled with red liquid, creating a possibility to interpret it as period blood.⁶ In fact, the combination of sensuality with innocence is one of the crucial characteristics of the images presented in *Babe*, visible not only in its color scheme. In *Babe* highly erotic photographs of two girls cuddling, drawings of young women having sex and images of a woman’s buttocks being squeezed are juxtaposed with portraits of girls in *My Little Pony* T-shirts and figurines of characters from children’s movies.

Petra Collins’s artwork can be seen as a straightforward example of linking innocence with sexuality. She presents girls’ stories of experiencing sexual harassment for the first time – narratives of abuse are written with colorful markers and surrounded with flashy kids stickers: butterflies, rainbows, hearts and animals.⁷ Combining difficult and often shocking text with childish or “girlish” aesthetics is also a popular trope in young women’s self-expression on the Tumblr website. Nichole Nicholson (2014) argues that “the pairing of typically feminine, indeed what could be called hyper-feminine, visual

⁵ Maisie Cousins, *What girls are made of 1*, 2013 (Collins, 2015, p. 55).

⁶ Maisie Cousins, *Peonie*, 2015 (Collins, 2015, p. 56).

⁷ Petra Collins, *I hope this helps you sleep at night #1, I hope this helps you sleep at night #2*, 2014, print on a plush fleece (Collins, 2015, pp. 50, 53).

cues in the form of color, patterns, and imagery, paired with other, non-stereotypical elements, such as profanity [...] points to the very constructedness of the feminine aesthetics" (2014, p. 77). Several works collected in *Babe* were first posted on Tumblr and Instagram, therefore some similarities come as no surprise. Even more essential than noticing the connection between those aesthetics is the fact that, as Nicholson points out, the choice of visual tropes works as a sign of the awareness of the "constructedness" of the so-called girliness.

The foreword to *Babe* is written by Tavi Gevinson, a twenty-year-old feminist, founder of the *ROOKIE* magazine.⁸ The issue of constructing girlhood is addressed by Gevinson (2015) at the very beginning of the book: she writes that the works in *Babe* "wear constructed girliness with a bit of a smirk" (2015, p. 7), and observes that artists are "de-infantilizing and redefining 'babe' for themselves through depictions of beauty far from the Photoshopped ones that saturate our culture" (2015, p. 6). Referenced "girliness" can indicate several meanings, even though it is most often connected with consumerism and the faux politics of the "girl power" phenomenon. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (2004) argue that "[g]irlie encompasses the tabooed symbols of women's feminine enculturation – Barbie dolls, makeup [...] high heels – and says using them isn't shorthand for 'we've been duped.' Using makeup can be sexy, campy, ironic" (2004, p. 60). They point out that there is no one, ultimate interpretation of these attributes of "girliness." In *Babe* artists take "girliness" to its extremes: I have already discussed the excessive use of pink color, but there are numerous ways in which young women confront symbols of girlhood. Another one is One of Arvida Byström's contributions to *Babe* is a series of photographs of hands holding phones.⁹ In Byström's photographs women wear letter beads bracelets with words "pussy" and "whatever," have colorful long nails with cat pictures on them, and are photographed against pink and violet backgrounds. These stereotypically connected with girlhood items: phones, letter beads bracelets, painted nails, glitter, images of cute kittens – exaggerated and combined together expose the absurdity of the pop-cultural image of the girl. Rosalind Sibielski (2011) discusses the term "girl" as defined by gender and age, but also as a "discursive category that delineates the criteria through which this state is defined, the interests, behaviors [...] through which it expressed (and

⁸ *ROOKIE* (www.rookiemag.com) is a magazine targeted at teenage girls and the aesthetics of the website often resemble those which can be found in *Babe*.

⁹ Arvida Byström with Maja Malou, *Depression calls* (Collins, 2015, pp. 34–35).

thus, through which one qualifies as a girl), and the cultural meanings that are attached to it" (Sibielski, 2011, paragraph 6). She goes on to state that "in spite of its appeal to ontological grounding, the designation girl is also not a fixed identity category, as discursive constructions and embodied enactments of girlhood [...] between cultures and historical periods" (Sibielski, 2011, paragraph 6). While in culture and media the term often functions as self-evident, merely placing the "girl" in a different social context uncovers its cultural connotations. "Girliness" is constructed in numerous different ways, and I argue that at least some artists featured in *Babe* – including Arvida Byström, Petra Collins or Maisie Cousins – want to expose it. In consequence, they create art which confronts the expectations and stereotypes of what it means to be a "girl." Their play with the image of a girl can be understood in at least two different ways: first, as I argued, it can be read as an ironic exposure of the absurdity of the image of the girl. Secondly, the artists' work can serve as proud reclamation of those attributes of girlhood that are often treated as immature or irrelevant. In both cases, young artists prove that they are aware of how media and culture present girliness.

In the already quoted foreword to the book, Gevinson suggests that this redefinition of "babe" (a term usually used to describe an attractive young women) happens through displaying images that do not contribute to the mainstream, often Photoshopped representations of beauty (2015, p. 6). Representation of the woman's body in culture is still an important feminist issue that artists in *Babe* could engage with; however, the book does not offer anything new in the debate on beauty standards. There are some images that could be seen as attempts to normalize female bodies and to show diversity among girls and women: *Babe* opens with Hanna Antonsson's photograph of a breast with visible nipple hair,¹⁰ includes Arvida Byström's photograph of a young woman sitting in a cafe with visible period stains on her underwear¹¹ and Sandy Kim's photo of a woman's vagina also with period blood.¹² Yet these examples do not change the fact that the majority of models presented in *Babe* are skinny, blonde, white and able-bodied. In the introduction to the book, its editor Petra Collins writes: "I have allowed myself to make space, to carve myself a new landscape, which I hope will be inclusive enough for others" (2015, p. 9). It is not inclusive – Collins, despite her hopes, does not provide a space of expression for every-

¹⁰ Hanna Antonsson, *Nipple*, 2013 (Collins, 2015, p. 10).

¹¹ Arvida Byström, part of *There will be blood* series (Collins, 2015, p. 33).

¹² Sandy Kim, *bloody pussy, nyc*, 2013 (Collins, 2015, p. 93).

body: black and Asian girls are in definite minority among the models and none of them has a (visible) disability. Sibielski stresses that “both cultural understandings of girlhood and the performance of girlhood [...] always intersect with other categories of identity, including race, class, sexuality and dis/ability” (Sibielski, 2011, paragraph 10). Yet majority of cultural texts present “girl” as a white and able-bodied young woman, and *Babe* is no exception. In this sense the book does not bring any change to the image of the “girl,” but inscribes itself into one characterized by Anita Harris when she stated that “the category of ‘girl’ [...] prioritized the white, middle class and non-disabled” (2004, p. xx). The lack of substantial diversity is also disappointing in the context of *Babe's* aim to represent the voice of young feminists, who try to challenge male-dominated art scene, and discuss what femininity means in contemporary world.

The voice of adolescent girls and young women is often dismissed, as Driscoll observes: “[f]eminists and feminism are interested in girls, but less on their own terms than as necessary precursors to women/feminists” (2002, p. 131). In *Generations* Devoney Looser (1997) points out a similar problem, as she states: “I would counter that there have also been [...] feminist practices of ‘youthism’ – of dismissing the intellectual interests, contributions, and motivations of the next generation of feminists on the basis of our supposed naïveté and inexperience” (Looser, 1997, p. 36). *Generations* came out twenty years ago, but young feminists’ voices are still sometimes treated as not mature or not significant enough. Undoubtedly, young feminists often make mistakes and repeat errors of previous generations: the mentioned lack of diversity in *Babe* is the best example. Another one can be Karley Sciortino’s artwork¹³ with the goal to “lean in,” referencing famous book by Sheryl Sandberg from 2013, in which the author attempts to empower women in the workplace. *Lean In* was highly criticized for its disregard for problems of class and race,¹⁴ and by mentioning Sandberg’s work, Sciortino in a way repeats the problematic perspective of the women before her. Young feminists voices of artists in *Babe* still need to be recognized, yet while they identify themselves as bringing “change” to the current order, they often forget to acknowledge the already discussed problems.

With its provocative photographs and drawings, as well as engagement in issues such as sexual harassment of teenagers in the works of Petra Collins, or Aimee Leigh’s screenshot from Google search which states: “Your search – young girls loving themselves – did not

¹³ Karley Sciortino, *To-Do List for Life*, 2014 (Collins, 2015, pp. 146–147).

¹⁴ See for example bell hooks’ article *Dig deep: Beyond lean in* (hooks 2013).

match any documents,"¹⁵ *Babe* can be read as a feminist manifesto, a declaration of respect for oneself and of a need for honesty. Identifying women's problems with confidence and a call for "self-love" is present in several works in the book: from the above-mentioned Aimee Leigh's screenshot of the Google search, through Grace Miceli's drawing of a heart with a "ME" ribbon,¹⁶ to Jamia Wilson's hand-written confession: "When I'm feeling like I'm fronting or losing myself – or martyring myself, I imagine my five-year-old self [...] reminding me who I AM. I just can't lie to HER. I just can't lie to ME. Myself."¹⁷ The work of those artists draws attention to the subjects of confidence and identity in young women's lives, which is a recurring theme, as Driscoll ponders: "if 'girl' indicates uncertain narratives about identity [...] does girl culture have to reflect those uncertainties and displacements?" (Driscoll, 2002, p. 235). Karley Sciortino also discusses the theme of confidence, self-love and (less directly) identity, when she shares her "to do" list, which includes: "Never fake another orgasm," "Reclaim the word 'slut,'" "Have self-respect (it's the key to good sex!)," "Say 'I hate myself' less" and the already discussed goal to "For fuck's sake, *lean in!*"¹⁸ Sciortino's work shows that for young women believing in oneself, healthy sex life and being ambitious can be equally important. The engagement in topics of sexuality, both in Sciortino's "to do" list and in other artists' work, combined with exaggerated "girly" presence constitutes a part of "girly culture" characterized by Baumgardner and Richards, who state that "girlie culture is a rebellion against the false impression that since women don't want to be sexually exploited, they don't want to be sexual" (Baumgardner & Richards, 2004, p. 62). The artists in *Babe* demonstrate that sexuality is important and is a valuable part of girls' and young women's lives.

Sciortino's ambition to "reclaim the word 'slut'" was to some extent already achieved by third-wave feminists, especially those young women who identified with the Riot grrrl movement. As April K. Householder observes "T[t]he third wave redefined the infantilized and apolitical term 'girl,' and turned feminism into a movement about riotous 'grrrls,' reclaiming once pejorative terms like 'cunt,' 'bitch,' and 'slut'" (Householder, 2015, p. 21). Sciortino's goal, alongside other artists' attempts to redefine the girl and girliness, can be read as a copy of third-wave feminists' goals – or as conscious reference to the Riot grrrl movement. Reading

¹⁵ Aimee Leigh, *Young Girls Loving Themselves*, 2013, Google Search screenshot over photo-booth photograph (Collins, 2015, p. 99).

¹⁶ Grace Miceli, *I <3 Me*, 2013, colored pencil on paper (Collins, 2015, p. 105).

¹⁷ Jamia Wilson, *Untitled*, 2014 (Collins, 2015, p. 167).

¹⁸ Karley Sciortino, *To-Do List for Life*, 2014 (Collins, 2015, pp. 146–147).

Babe as a feminist manifesto allows the reader to observe allusions and similarities between the book and the Riot Grrrl manifesto, published in one of the early zines: *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girls Style Now*. If the artists in *Babe* want to challenge through their work the male-dominated art scene, create self-produced images and thereby decide about the image of the girl, and support fellow female artists, then they directly reference the movement. could be called modern-day riot grrrls. Women identifying as riot grrrls, listing the reasons for the movement voiced the following demands In Riot Grrrl manifesto young women state: "us girls crave [...] books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways" and "we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other."¹⁹ As Jessalynn Keller notices: "the riot grrrl community was sustained through girls' self-produced media products" (Keller, 2015), similarly to the first, site The Ardorous, and then works collected in *Babe*. Yet another resemblance would be the need to question the image of the girl, girlishness and femininity. Several artists in *Babe* invoke "do-it-yourself" practices (collages, low quality photography) that characterized the 1990s rRiot gGrrrl movement, but they exchanged punk aesthetics for overtly feminine ones. The need to reclaim the image of the girl is present both in rRiot gGrrrl culture and in *Babe*, in the sense that some of the artists attempt to redefine the image of girls and teenage culture, even though they are no longer teenagers.²⁰

The riot grrrl movement existed almost simultaneously with its more mainstream version – the "girl power" trend. Girl power as a cultural phenomenon was questionable in numerous ways, including its rooting in consumerism. Jessica K. Taft notices points out that "marketers and those with products to sell use the discourse of Girl Power to produce and circulate one of the most pervasive images of girlhood: that of the girl as consumer" (Taft, 2004, p. 74). Girl power became a way to sell goods and present the girl as a perfect consumer of those goods. Images of femininity known from *Babe* can quickly follow the path of the girl power ideology: in 2013 American Apparel (a company often criticized for its sexist advertisements²¹) was selling T-shirts with artwork from Petra Collins and The Ardorous collective. Once again, a possible vision of empowering young women may shift into a marketing strategy.

¹⁹ The whole text of the manifesto can be found online (*Riot grrrl manifesto*, n.d.).

²⁰ The artists featured in *Babe* are mostly twenty-something, though their age varies from teenagers to over thirty.

²¹ American Apparel is known for sexual content in its advertising campaigns. What is more, the company's founder and then CEO Dov Charney was the subject of numerous sexual harassment lawsuits (no harassment was proven). For more information see for example: Weed & Davis, 2013.

Householder states that “if older feminists accused third wavers of being superficial in their relationship to pop culture, [...] overly empowered and spoiled, the ‘selfie’ generation is defined by an even more pronounced individualist approach to feminism” (Householder, 2015, p. 21). Several artists in *Babe* can be characterized as representing the so-called selfie generation, and could be criticized for appearing superficial or self-centered, yet, as I tried to demonstrate in my paper – their voice matters. Through their artwork, they challenge images of femininity and ways of expressing girls’ sensuality. *Babe* is also an example of how feminism can impact art and aesthetics in contemporary world. Although it is possible to read the anthology as a feminist manifesto, I suggest that the book works best as a possibility to explore girls’ identity, body and sexuality from a female perspective.

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Reclaiming Adolescent Sexuality: Images of Girlhood in Petra Collins's Babe

This paper examines photographs, drawings, collages and other art forms collected in the book *Babe*, edited by photographer Petra Collins and published by Prestel in 2015. I read the collected artwork as an attempt to present the image of the girl (including her sexuality) from a young woman's perspective. *Babe*, which includes works such as photographs of teenagers with visible period blood on the underwear or a to-do list with the goal of never faking another orgasm, asks who a contemporary girl is and how young artists can challenge traditional images of femininity. In my analysis I focus on the excessive use of the color pink in *Babe*, characterizing the way artists blend innocence with eroticism. I argue that by playing with artifacts of "girliness," artists can both expose the absurdity of the image of the girl in popular culture and reclaim symbols of girlhood. I suggest that Collins – despite her ambitions to create an inclusive platform for female artists – does not present a diverse image of girls, who in *Babe* is still predominantly white and able-bodied. I introduce the potential reading of *Babe* as a feminist visual manifesto, in reference to the Riot Grrrl movement and the cultural phenomenon of "girl power." I suggest that the book offers a possibility of exploring the figure of the girl from the perspective of young female artists.

Keywords:

girlhood, femininity, feminism, photography

Odzyskując młodzieńczą seksualność: wizerunki dziewczynkości w „Babe” Petry Collins

Artykuł jest analizą fotografii, rysunków, kolaży i innych prac zebranych przez fotografkę Petrę Collins w albumie *Babe*, wydanym w 2015 roku przez Prestel. W artykule odczytuję zebrane prace jako szansę zaprezentowania wizerunku dziewczyny (w tym jej seksualności) z perspektywy młodej kobiety. *Babe* – w której znajdują się zarówno fotografie nastolatek z widoczną krwią menstruacyjną na bieliźnie, jak i zdjęcie listy zadań, na której artystka umieszcza postanowienie, by nigdy więcej nie udawać orgazmu – zadaje pytanie kim

dzisiaj jest dziewczyna i w jaki sposób młode artystki mogą kwestionować utarte obrazy kobiecości. Podczas analizy skupiam się na przewodze różu w warstwie wizualnej albumu, ukazując sposób, w jaki artystki łączą pozorną niewinność z erotyzmem. Twierdę, że poprzez grę z konwencjami „dziewczyńskość” autorki prac mogą zarówno eksponować sztuczność wizerunku młodej kobiety w kulturze popularnej, jak i odzyskiwać symbole dziewczęcości. Sugeruję, że Collins – mimo próby stworzenia inkluzywnej platformy dla artystek – nie oferuje zróżnicowanego obrazu dziewczyny, która w *Babe* wciąż jest przeważnie biała i pełnosprawna. W odczytaniu *Babe* jako feministycznego wizualnego manifestu odwołuję się do ruchu Riot Grrrl i fenomenu kulturowego reprezentowanego przez hasło „girl power”. Sugeruję, że album oferuje zgłębienie postaci dziewczyny z punktu widzenia młodych artystek.

Słowa kluczowe:

dziewczyńskość, kobiecość, feminizm, fotografia

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