

Tools for the Feminist Present

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What would it mean to think about the history of feminist activism through its tools? Through the materials, technologies, and routines of its making? Automatic appliances, the birth control pill, and the Hitachi Magic Wand are all mythologized in popular histories of women's growing social autonomy in the late 20th century. Though these objects might alter an individual's life – there is nothing minor about getting-off – none of them take on the relational, world-building capacities of Xerox machines, offset printing presses, or VHS tapes. The tools of doing feminist activism have stayed, for the most part, unremarked upon *as tools* – ready-to-hand objects wielded deftly in order to extend the user's capacity toward a given task.

Tool catalogs like the glossy, 300-page tome issued annually by Lee Valley collect and fetishize practical objects, and tell the reader what they can do with each tool. These catalogs promise action through objects perfectly designed for function. In this project we imagine a scenario where a Feminist Tool Catalog arrived in the mail, from which objects could be admired, re-imagined, acquired, and ultimately put to use.

With this catalog, we are chasing the tools of older feminisms, trying to decipher the outlines drawn with sharpie on banged-up workshop pegboards. We work in homage to *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*. Published in 1973, this large-format, newsprint catalog referenced the better-known *Whole Earth Catalog* in its formal qualities but “advertised” second-wave feminist tools: the book is a collection of practical information on art-making,

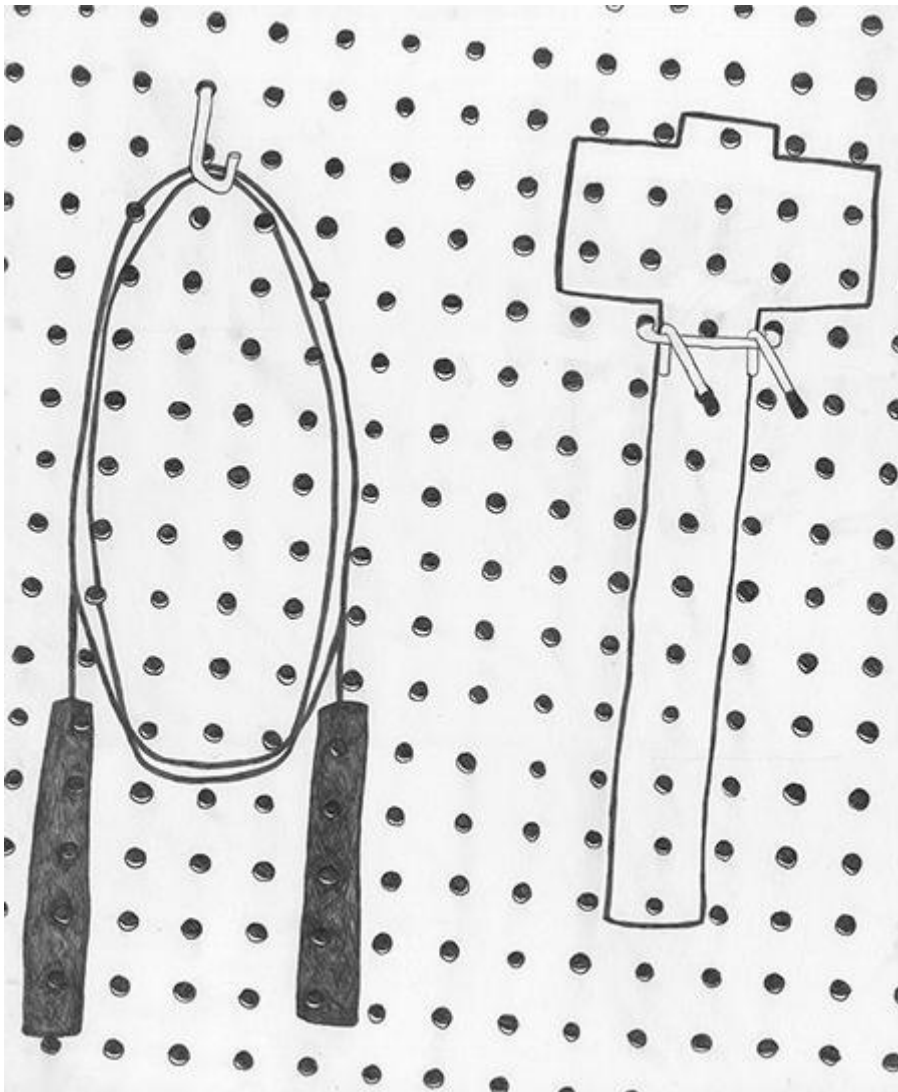
small-press printing, birth control, unionization, gardening, self-defense, accessing abortion, bicycle-repair, and other do-it-yourself topics of interest to feminists.

Produced by a collective of feminist activists from research they conducted over the course of a year spent travelling across the U.S., the survival catalog evokes 1970s counter-cultural celebrations of accessible technologies: this catalog would give users the things they needed to “do” feminism in their own terms. Existing today on the dusty oversized shelves of libraries and online booksellers – we first encountered the text at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, then bought our own copy online – this out-of-print catalog exists as an archive of second-wave feminist tool culture.

The original spirit of *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog*, reimagined for today, captures feminism’s rich countercultural history, too often forgotten within the masculine, white settler aesthetics often used to re-engage 1970s DIY techno-cultures from the present. These tools are for sharing, passing on skills, lending a hand, getting by. Might the objects, resources, and community pedagogies modeled in the original survival catalog be re-imagined from a post-Internet moment and from a position of looking both backwards and forwards in time?

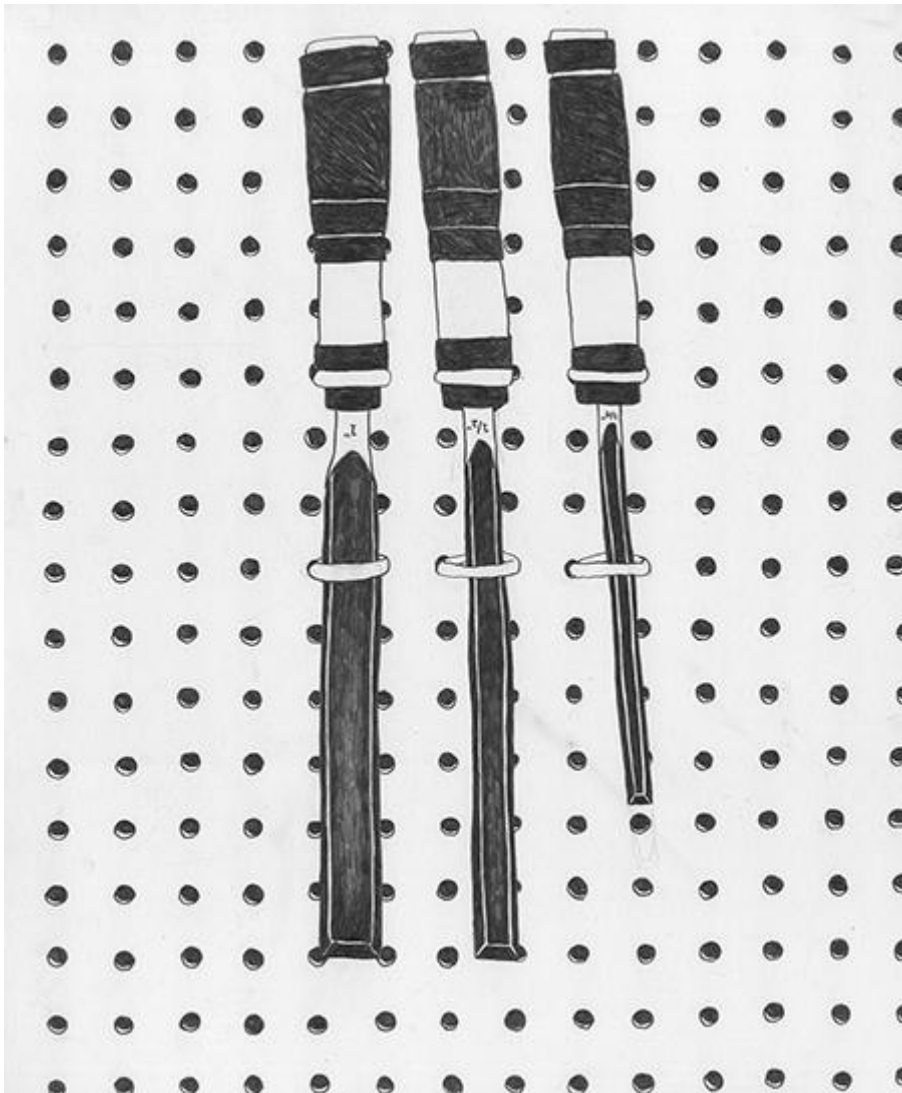
In what follows, we feature sketches for a fantasy mail-order catalog of today.

Feminist Utopia Peg-Board



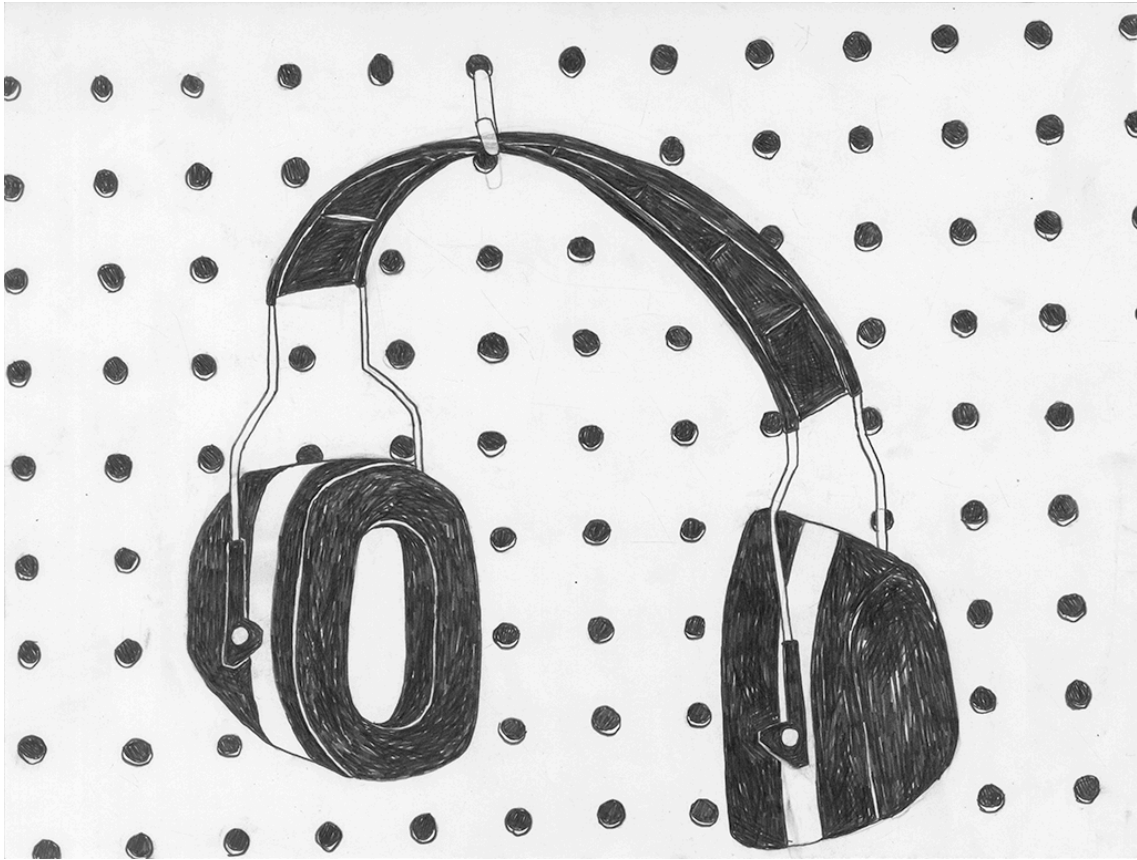
Peg board is a small-scale world-making project, utopian, as feminist politics often are. As a technology, peg-board offers evenly spaced holes, a variety of different hanging attachments, and a blank, melamine surface that begs for thick, sharpied outlines of objects. These outlines can be practically aimed at accommodating the tools we already have, or they can be aspirational; spaces held open for tools we hope to house, or haven't yet imagined.

Persistence Chisels



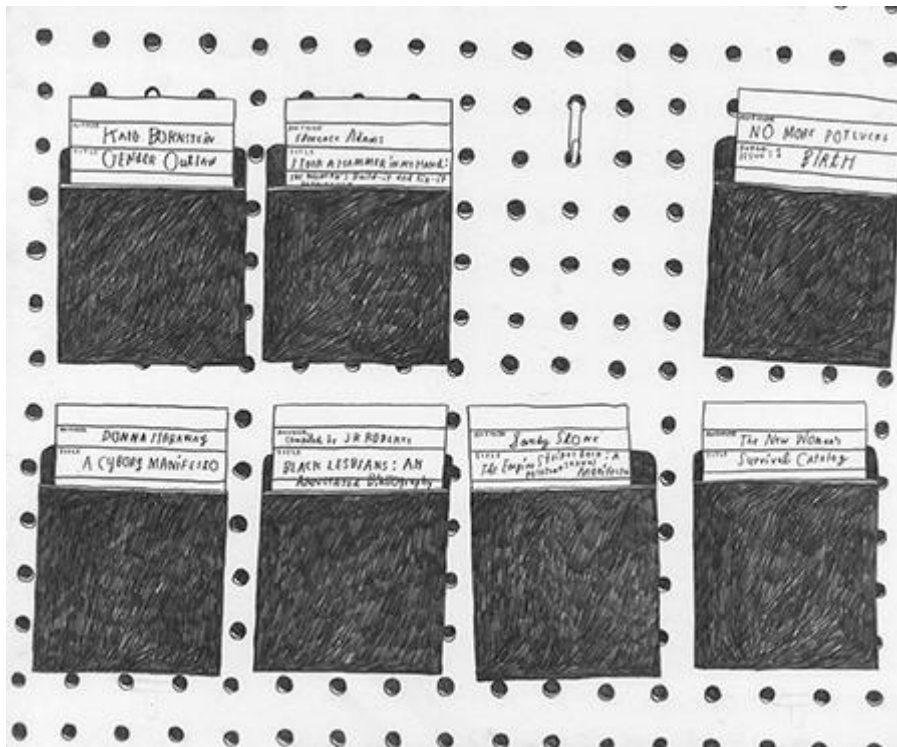
Lovingly handcrafted from hardened steel, with thoughtfully bevelled edges, this expandable starter set features chisels specially designed to tackle problems that unite communities of struggle. Chisel away at transmisogyny, white feminism, the prison industrial complex. The work will be slow, methodical, and sweaty, but it will not relent until the objects and scenes it works upon have been fundamentally reshaped.

Headphones of Refusal



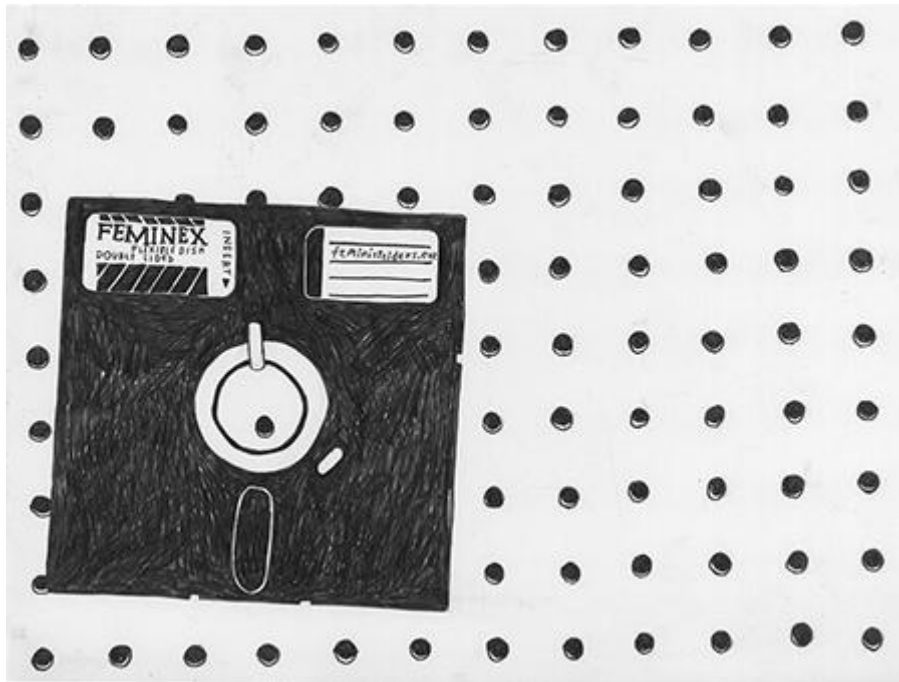
Industrial-standard hearing protectors suitable for reducing general aural aggravations and micro-aggressions: your sister's jerky husband; that woman at work who "forgot" your pronouns again. Also useful when the buzz of organizing burns you out and only silence will do. Comes with interchangeable foam liners for sharing.

Workshop Mini-Library



The word “survival” in *The New Woman’s Survival Catalog* is testament to the fact that reference books represent both a field of struggle and an everyday tactic for getting by. “Bad Feminist” Roxane Gay has said, of reading and writing books: “They have allowed me to remember. They have allowed me to forget. They have allowed me to imagine different endings and better possible worlds.”

Anti-Obsolescence Floppy Disc of Feminist Elders



Despite Internet Trolls and rampant online misogyny, computers have long been fundamental communicative tools for women's work, and feminist organizing. Cram this disc into a computer (find a hole, we promise it will play) and encounter feminist computing's history. Browse the forgotten gallery of early women and trans coders, operators, and engineers. Play in the archive through one of several limited-edition, collectively made feminist video games. Explore the story of Sandy Stone's landmark essay "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto" (1987) as it has circulated through early Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) and listservs, re-versioned over the years by Stone, who continues to distribute the text under creative commons license.

Guarantee



Feminist tools are 100% guaranteed to frustrate, fail some of the time, and be incompatible with the feminist tools of others. If you are not satisfied with your tool for any reason, try passing it on to a friend; the best pegboards are built through collaboration.