Feminist Perspectives on Curating
Dorothee Richter

Curating is a form of knowledge production which means, it is also a gendered form of knowledge production, in this talk I would like to ask in the first part: What would make a curatorial project a feminist one and in the second part, I would like to closely look at one case of curatorial knowledge production.

First: what would make a curatorial project a feminist one? I came to the conclusion that four categories should be met:

Categories
1. The first one should be to consider gender equality in terms of numbers in exhibitions and curatorial projects. I remember that this demand was thoroughly discussed, because of the problem of reproducing a simplistic notion of “male” and “female”. We as feminists always fought for a multiplicity of sexes, beyond the binary code of a conventional paradigm. "Normal sexuality is thus, strictly speaking, an ordering, which the hysterics deny (then becoming sick)",1 as Jacqueline Rose, following Lacan, has put it. This would mean that it would be a feminist project in art if one could infer from it the ordering of gender, as well as the difficulty or impossibility of this adjustment process, and also make it possible to identify the fictitious category of normal sexuality. This would distinguish an art that criticizes and unsettles existing gender roles from art that, in a proxy function, affirms “sexual fulfilment” and at the same time cements gender order. A conventional affirmative art would basically conceal the splitting of the subject, to make it possible to see entire bodies and idealized images. A critical, feminist, potent art would reveal the splitting of the subject of the gaze; it would have no stress-relieving function. But, also derived from a Lacanian perspective, it is important to be aware of the position of “women” in patriarchy; “women” are denied a subject position in so far that the only possible subject position is that of the dominant male position, of the one who has the phallus. So however creatively we play with gender roles, stealing the subject position by mimicking “male” behaviour or looks, we should be aware of the mimicry and nevertheless still demand from the perspective of lack, from the position of the crossed out subject. In so far as I would, as a political demand, still adhere to the counting of numbers of men and women, especially when in the artistic field—in curating, exhibition-making, art, and universities—the imbalance is still in full bloom, or to put it differently, as long as white men hold the most of the top positions in universities, in ranking lists of the art market, and in institutional jobs. Where there is still an urgent need for the masked Guerrilla Girls! Therefore, I think that the demand for equality of representation has to be maintained, seeing this as a temporarily strategy, a support structure on the way to diversity and multiplicity beyond fixed categories as a horizon.

2. The second would be to cite historical references correctly. Which means, to refer to the movements, not to the singled out artistic geniuses, or stars, a paradigm which the art market prefers. This means in our context to see the revolutionary movements of the ’60s like Fluxus, Happenings, Womanhouse, and other feminist group works embedded in a struggle for new forms of communities, new forms
of working together, new forms of meaning production/organisation that would be later called curating.

Which means to stay with the questioning of paradigms, like authorship, production modes, new forms of distribution and reception. These forms had in mind a specifically changed interrelation between audience and artists, between participants and producers, between high and low cultural production, between "races", and, last not least, between the relations of gendered roles. These transgressive practices from the past are always in danger of being connected back to one author or one artist, which limits their potential revolutionary approach in production, distribution, and reception. For contemporary curating, it means to keep to the approach of transgressive practices, creating new forms referring to archives, community-based projects, concept exhibitions, meeting spaces, and interventions in the public space, and to acknowledge historical forerunners and initiatives in their complexities.2

3. The third would be disturbance through the image, through the display. That does not mean, of course, that I see an exhibition as an integrated work of art; it is a specific, very complex narrative. So to disturb an easy narrative would be an important mission. According to Jacqueline Rose, Freud “relates—quite explicitly—the failure to depict the sexual act to bisexuality and to a problem of representational space. [...] A confusion at the level of sexuality brings with it a disturbance of the visual field.” Jacques Lacan differentiates the potential disturbance or calming which can result from art or painting. He sees the mode and manner of an artist in the desire to become visible as an author, to be a subject, to convey in the individuality of style something that gives the viewer the impression of being looked at from within the picture: “[...] Thus they will see in the end, as in a filigree, something so specific for each of the painters, that they feel the presence of the gaze.” The gaze is here understood as the disturbing, unsettling moment, the recognition of being viewed from the outside.

Transferred to the act of putting up an exhibition, one might say that in curatorial work, the production of meaning can give rise to an encounter that looks at the viewer. In some contrary cases, however, certain painting or exhibition assumes the function of something for the eye to feed on, by which the visitor can lay down his/her gaze (like weapons). This would provide the pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting, which Lacan calls the “dompte-regard”, the tamed gaze. The project in the realm of the project Female Coalities (which I curated in 1997) emphasised this taming effect of the visual, but also of an author’s name. The artists Isolde Look, Irmgard Dahms, Anne Schlöpcke invited Barbara Bloom, Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith and put stuffed children’s animals on an auction with a professional auctioneer in an importang gallery in Bremen, which sold off most of the issues, the sold animals were replaced with a polaroid of the owner with it. The purchase prices often related to the fame of the respective artist.

This eye trap with its pacifying effect is revealed by the artists in the above mentioned project. This disturbing element would therefore also be unsettling and would call into question each of the categories of race, class, and gender.
I also suspect that the once hyped notion of “the curatorial” might work as an “(eye) trap”. The notion of “the curatorial” implies a problematic ennoblement of curating as a meaning producing activity which takes place (as I see it) in a politically and ideologically contested field. Putting “curating” on eye level with philosophy, it is in danger of asking for essentialist, supra-temporal meaning production from curating, which would function outside history. Instead, I would propose staying with re-contextualizing, historicising, localising and being aware of the political demands and alliances. Feminist curating is part of a political movement.

4. **Institutional critique**: to transfer this to exhibitions would mean always calling into question the context of the exhibition, using curatorial methods to unsettle the curatorial authorship of an exhibition’s discourse on truth and the “quality” discourse. Which means from a feminist perspective institutional critique should be embedded in the projects. This would, of course, mean that any hierarchical positioning between curator and artists has to be questioned. As types of naturalization effects in art institutions, Oliver Marchart—citing the museum as an example—singles out four components that each have a gender-specific aspect: firstly, the **power to define**, which claims that the art institution is a neutral agency of mediation and judgment, is presented as being natural; secondly, the **exclusions and inclusions**, which make people forget that there are always very specific exclusions; thirdly, the **constraints of cultural policy, budget, and similar factors** to which the institution itself is subject; and fourthly, its **class-based character**. The behavioural norms and built-in ideological concepts which, as subtexts, structure art institutions derive from the interests of a specific group, of which the paradigmatic representative is the white, male, middle-class subject. (In the post-Fordist era, however, a clear classification like this has begun to undergo a shift, given that in the production process the subject is downgraded in favour of group processes. This makes it possible to speculate, for instance, that the middle-class subject is in retreat, as Felix Ensslin has remarked.)
Institutional critique also means that, from a feminist-political perspective, all behaviour patterns are in question as well, all conventions and structures. This is why in some of my talks “False-Hearted Fanny” interferes, demonstrating the multi-layeredness of any discourse; she does not feel bound to institutionalised behaviour patterns and tends to show a subject as a split subjectivity. To take into account the structural and material side of curating means—again—to think of feminist curating as involved in and part of political and economic struggles. In thinking of curating as a form of producing knowledge or, in other words, of interpellations, means consciously taking up a position in an ideologically contested space.

Individual museum presentations and their underlying ideological framework have been discussed and convincingly analysed in detail by Mieke Bal, Jana Scholze, Anna Schober, and also (jointly) by Gerlinde Hauer, Roswitha Muttenthaler, Anna Schober, and Regina Wonisch, to mention only a few.

Any form of institutional critique should address distribution, production, and reception, all parts of the art system that are still infected with patriarchal orderings. This means that a feminist urgency in curating would have to stay with this thrive to repetition (Wiederholungszwang), in finding other forms of curating, so called non-representationals forms of curating, which would create space for other forms to live in a curated space, to discuss, to inform, to laugh, to share, to contradict, to infect with an attitude. This was the motivation for the archival exhibition Materials at Kuenstlerhaus Bremen in 1999, featuring thirty feminist artists, art historians, and theorists alongside a symposium on feminist positions in contemporary arts.
To give you an example that the underlying ordering of gendered roles is also embedded in this new discursive formation called “curating” and how much a critical approach is needed in the field of curating, I would like to analyse one of these contemporary examples from the sector of publishing in detail:

2. Case Study: The Exhibitionist

The birth of the museum is closely related to the burgeoning bourgeois class; it is clearly related to contemporary curating in a historical timeline. The Cristal Palace is described as a paradigmatic site of instituting a new skopic regime. Tony Bennett described the goals related to the famous Cristal Palace in London briefly as follows: “Just as in the festivals of the absolutist court, an ideal and ordered world unfolds before and emanates from the privileged and controlling perspective of the prince, so, in the museum, an ideal and ordered world unfolds before and emanates from a controlling position of knowledge and vision: one, however, which has been democratized in that, at least in principle, occupancy of that position—the position of Man—is openly and freely available to all.”

He continues in a very poignant turn: “It is, however, around that phrase ‘at least in principle’ that the key issues lie. For in practice, of course, the space of representation shaped into being by the public museum was hijacked by all sorts of particular social ideologies: it was sexist in the gendered patterns of its exclusions, racist in its assignation of the aboriginal populations of conquered territories to the lowest rungs of human evolution, and bourgeois in the respect that it was clearly articulated to bourgeois rhetorics of progress.” As a subject construction, the situation of seeing through a controlling perspective of overview and of being seen, the bourgeois subject has installed the agency of control inside itself—it is controlling itself.

In many ways, curating inherited forms of exclusion. As Olga Fernandez uttered, “Curators’ expertise is usually defined by a set of procedural skills and organisational abilities, and intellectual production.” Her argument is that this knowledge combination is also a key element in the post-Fordist economy: “The entrepreneurial abilities of the curator and the expanded exhibitions formats are symptomatic of the new economic conditions that require new contexts of collaboration and interaction.” This means that the fascination and the pre-occupation with curating and exhibition-making of so many countless publications and symposia are partly due to the ideological concept of this figure, the curator, who seems to have gained authorship in this rather confusing new world order with its newly installed infrastructures.

The area of curating therefore provides this imaginary promise and is thus an especially contested field—a special representational battleground—and, as mentioned before, a new discursive formation is therefore installed. This is also why the ideological discussions around curating matter.

As a case study I would like to discuss The Exhibitionist, a magazine published since 2009 by Jens Hoffmann, sometimes with collaborators. In this screenshot you see the image of the Cristal Palace on the cover in the middle. For the newer issues, it has also been accompanied by a blog. From the beginning, only a part of curating was the topic of this journal, and I quote: “The Exhibitionist does not intend to occupy itself with all forms of curatorial practice. Rather, it is specifically concerned with the act of exhibition making: the creation of a display, within a particular socio-political context, based on a carefully formulated argument, presented through the meticulous selection and methodical installation of artworks, related
objects from the sphere of art, and objects from other areas of visual culture.”

Just to remind you, dear reader, curating could mean many more different things: publishing, organising symposia, opening up digital platforms, intervening in archives, in radio stations, presenting editions, working in the public space, creating a social space, or social sculptures, or a series of discussions. The main task of the Exhibitionist, according to Jens Hoffmann is therefore as follows: “We concur that the curatorial process is indeed a selection process, an act of choosing from a number of possibilities, an imposition of order within a field of multiple (and multiplying) artistic concerns. A curator’s role is precisely to limit, exclude, and create meaning using existing signs, codes, and materials.”

From my perspective, this represents a very narrow concept of a curator or an exhibition-maker: the reduction of the role to an excluding of positions.

Perhaps the name of the journal has to do with this limited concept of exhibition-making; the core issue is therefore also reduced to a specific subject position, which more or less ironically is claimed to be an exhibitionist, which means generally speaking, “A person who behaves in an extravagant way in order to attract attention,” as my online translator suggests. The German and English versions of Wikipedia differ in defining an exhibitionist; while in English the exhibitionist condition could be theoretically subscribed to either men or women, even if more often recognised in men, the German version says bluntly: “An exhibitionist is generally a male person who gains sexual stimulation out of showing his own arousal to normally attractive female persons,” in brackets, “showing an erect penis for publicly achieved satisfaction.”

It ends with the addition: “In Germany all exhibitionism is prosecutable.”

So I suspect that this relation to a clinical sexual disorder, which has its specific life in patriarchy, is programmatically inscribed in some concepts of a curatorial subject. And it might explain why I felt so strangely moved when I recently came across the website of this publication again.

I will show you the covers of the publication online (see image above)—what narrative does this image production offer? You see here, a very prominent the historical example of the Cristal Palace, the reference to a new concept of a bour-
geois subject, who sees and is to be seen. A subject that will become a well-behaved citizen, because the agency of control is installed inside this subject.

And here, the very first issue, with a specific cover: this somewhat mysterious image is explained in the editorial note: “In homage to Marcel Duchamp we have chosen an image of his final work, *Étant donnés* (1946–66), for the cover of our first issue.

Anyone familiar with the piece knows that what is shown here, an old wooden door with two peepholes, is only a small part of the full experience of the work. Behind the doors there is an illuminated landscape and a naked woman; the exhibitionism of the scene invites us to look but it also exposes us, standing at the door in the midst of our voyeurism, to the gazes of others just entering the room. The pun of this publication’s title speaks to that doubling, to the way in which the curator is not only an exhibition maker but also one who publicly exposes his or her arguments and commitments in a vehemently visual fashion.”

I show here an image from the website of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where this work is on display. This last work by Marcel Duchamp on which he worked during his last years, when the art world considered him beyond the mate-
rial production of art, is seen as a double projection of a female-connotated body and the visual field, as Sotirios Bahtsetzis describes. This transition, or double projection, shows the main characteristic connotation of a space of vision and images of the female body. This transaction, as Linda Hentschel has analysed in depth, is exactly the moment of production of a technique in the visual field that produces gendered spaces. Hentschel shows that a main structure of Western image production is grounded in this scopic turn in the structure of desire. Hentschel argues (and here I follow also Bahtsetzis) that the historically conditioned construction of gender, and the relation of optical apparatuses, the visual field, and a feminised space, goes hand in hand with an underlying education of seeing as a sexualised activity, an education towards a scopic drive.

This phenomenon is connected to a scientifically described and controlled space, as presented by the instituting of a central perspective. In this new science, the male and female positions are clearly defined in a hierarchical order. The historical turning point is paradigmatically visualised in this work of Albrecht Dürer: Der Zeichner des liegenden Weibes (The Draftsman of the Lying Woman) (1538). This woodcut was an illustration in a treatise with the title: instruction in measurement. From a feminist perspective, Sigrid Schade and Linda Hentschel showed that the effect of this construction was not only the sexualised visual field but also the creation of a voyeuristic pattern, which was loaded with binary codes: the female associated with nature, the male associated with science; the female with the untamed landscape, the male with cultivated plants; the controlled position and the controller. The demonstration of controlled and subdued female sexuality is obvious. Interesting is the position of the viewer of this woodcut who is denied the viewpoint of the male subject, who instead has the full view of the female genitals, the so-called “beaver
shot.” So the moment of presentation and denial is simultaneously inscribed into this image.

To come back to Duchamp’s Étant donné, with the full title: 1. La chute d’eau 2. Le gaz d’éclairage (1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas) (1946-66). In the above-mentioned article by Bahtsetzis, he argues that Duchamp was well aware (to use a title by Jacqueline Rose) of sexuality in the field of vision and aimed at a critique of the gendered space. For my argumentation here, I condense Bahtsetzis’ lines of thoughts to the conclusion, in which he states that Étant donné is in this respect a special case of an anamorphic snapshot, as the viewer is excluded from the position of seeing, he has to testify the phallic construction of the scopic regime of modernity. But to cut the discussion short, the damaged body, which was actually put together from casts of Duchamp’s secret lover Maria Martins, plus a cast of the arm of his legal wife in later years, and its presentation in the rather bourgeois setting of hiding images suspected of pornography, did from my point of view reinforce this setting instead of questioning it. The scattered body is not shown just in its fragmentation, it is—even if looking violated—holding up a clearly phallic shaped lamp—‘honi soit qui mal y pense’—by the arm cast of Duchamp’s legal wife. The piece does show an uneasiness about the “real”, an uneasiness about what Lacan calls “jouissance” (the ‘female’ sexual pleasure), and an effort to maintain the phallic position.

Let’s go back to the initial presentation of this hiding door as a cover of the first Exhibitionist. We see the door of this scene, which may or may not double the structure of contemporary visual settings: the engendered space, the scopic structure which presents a clear hierarchy of gendered spaces, of relations between an objectified position and a subject in its full rights. What does it initiate in the row of covers we see here, which all revolve around the bourgeois setting of the Cristal Palace?
We see the representation of a secretary (a work by Cindy Sherman) and another beaver shot, if one wants to put it like that, a work that was intended to be a feminist commentary on sculpture by Niki de Saint Phalle. We see as male representations a dangerous looking Count Dracula, a beautiful Narcissus, endangered of drowning himself because he is so much in love with his mirrored face, a strong boxing champion, and a beautiful oversized sculpture of David by Michelangelo. I am very much aware that each of these covers could be interpreted in detail with all their underlying meanings and connotations, but in this case I would like to stay focused on the brief overview of male and female stereotypes, which, as I see it, present a narrative in this configuration of a row of covers: they define the framework of the curatorial subject for the already very gendered figure of the exhibitionist. The repetition of these stereotypes double and redouble the traditional
gender roles, even if the original artwork was intended to criticise gendered spaces. The slightly sarcastic attitude that is also conveyed does not question this in an in-depth way; instead, the traditional roles are presented with a subtle smirk. In this way, The Exhibitionist presents what it stands for: a traditional concept of exhibition-making, which of course goes hand in hand with a conservative gendered space in the visual field. The content often also centres on exhibition-making as an associative visual format that does not need too much theoretical insight.

Just as an interlude in terms of how a cover could function, maybe not as an artwork as such, but as a cover, it is also important to be aware where, how, and for whom an image works. It can, as Roland Barthes has discussed intensively, always be de-historicised and put together to generate a myth, an ideological construction.

This cover was put on the famous journal NEID (“envy” in English) by artist and D-Jane Ina Wutdke and shows a work by Claudia Reinhardt, an injured (“envy” in English) by artist and D-Jane Ina Wutdke “real” into the consciousness of the subject.28 This image shows the body, the hidden anxiety of patriarchy of castration and shows a work by Claudia Reinhardt, an injured (“envy” in English) by artist and D-Jane Ina Wutdke “real” into the consciousness of the subject.28

As Margaret Iversen demonstrates, Barthes’ “punctum” is a reference to Lacan’s concept of the gaze, and by the very use of the terms, the sting, wound, and puncture, which can be recognised as a relationship to deficiency as a result of the symbolic threat of castration, which can be recognised as a relationship to deficiency as a result of the symbolic threat of castration and which indicates the disturbing incursion of the “real” into the consciousness of the subject.28

Captions
1, 2 Exhibition in the framework of “Female Coalities,” curated by D. Richter, artists: Isolde Look, Irmgard Dahms, Anne Schlöpcke with Barbara Bloom, Cindy Sherman and Kiki Smith, Galerie Cornelius Herz, Dachau, 1996.
3 Me and False Hearted Fanny, talk at Hochschule für Gestaltung Karlsruhe, photograph published in Karlsruher Nachrichten, 29th of May 2015.
4, 5 Materialien / materials, an archive, exhibition at Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, accompanying a symposium on feminist positions in contemporary art with 30 folders with information (catalogues, articles, Dvds, Videos) by artists, theoreticians and curators understanding themselves as feminists, curated by D. Richter, 1999.
6 Screenshot Website of Exhibitionist, accessed 2015.
7 Screenshot, Cover Exhibitionist 1, accessed
8 Screenshot Website Philadelphia Museum of Art
9 Screenshot Website Philadelphia Museum of Art, showing a couple before Duchamp’s Étart donnés.
10 Albrecht Dürer, Der Zeichner des liegenden Weibes (The Draftsman of the Lying Woman), 1538
12 Comments on screenshot of the Exhibitionist.

Notes
1 Jacqueline Rose, Sexualität im Feld der Anschauung, Turia und Kant, Vienna, 1996, p. 57.
2 This is why we (Ronald Kolb and I) published the film Flux Us Now. Fluxus Explored with a Camera with eleven chapters, one of which refers particularly to gender in Fluxus; it follows up on some of the political agendas of Fluxus and emphasises the complexity and the contradictions of the movement. See www.fluxusnow.net.
3 See Jacqueline Rose, p. 229.
5 Exhibition at Gallerie Cornelius Herz, Bremen; in the framework of the project female coalities, curated by D. Richter, 1996.
8 Felix Ensslin, on the occasion of my lecture on artistic authorship at the Kunstkademie Stuttgart, Dec. 2015.
12 Gerlind Hauer, Roswitha Mutenthaler,

13 Non-representational forms of curating—this notion is obviously a contradiction in itself, because the so-called non-representational forms also represent, but it is worth thinking of what is actually happening in an exhibition space and about what a project represents.

14 The symposium “Dialogues and Debates - Feminist Positions in Contemporary Art”, which I curated, was held at the artist residency Die Hôte; the accompanying archive/exhibition was shown at Kuenstlerhaus Bremen. I asked all speakers to name at least five artists, theoreticians, or curators for the archive. The contributions to the symposium were published in Dorothee Richter, Die Hôte, eds., Dialoge und Debatten - Symposium zu feministischen Positionen in der zeitgenössischen bildenden Kunst, Verl. für Moderne Kunst, Nürnberg, 2000 (German/English).

15 At Kuenstlerhaus Bremen I also co-curated (with Sigrid Adorf and Kathrin Heinz) a series of talks on feminist issues in the visual field, which was published later in Sigrid Adorf, Kathrin Heinz, Dorothee Richter, guest eds., Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft, Im (Be)Griff des Bildes, Heft 35, Marburg, June 2003. This series was often combined with exhibitions inspired by a feminist approach, for example an exhibition by the artist group De Geuzen, see also Dorothee Richter, Programming for a Kuenstlerhaus, Institut für zeitgenössische Kunst, Nürnberg, 2002.

Curating from a feminist perspective inspired the exhibition series with the provocative title Feldforschung Hausfrauenkunst (field research in housewifery), (see Dorothee Richter-Grück, Kulturzentrum Schlachthof, eds., Feldforschung Hausfrauenkunst, Bremen 1992. Exhibition catalogue.), and the project female coalities, with exhibitions, dinners, screenings, talks, and performances in different venues all over Bremen (see Dorothee Richter-Grück, Zentralstelle für die Verwirklichung der Gleichberechtigung der Frau, eds., female coalities, Bremen, 1997. Exhibition catalogue).


18 Fernández, Olga, “Just what is it, that makes ‘Curating’ so different, so appealing?” in Institution as Medium, Curating as Institutional Critique, Part 1, OnCurating Issue 8, 2011, p. 40.

19 Ibid.


21 Ibid.


23 Translation by D. Richter.

24 Hoffmann, “An overture”.


Dorothee Richter is Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, and head of the Postgraduate Programme in Curating, CAS/ MAS Curating at the Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland; She is co-director with Susanne Clausen of the Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies, Practice-Based Doctoral Programme, as well as the publisher of the web journal OnCurating.org; Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, which travelled to 18 venues in Europe; Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, including Materialien/ Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera (Staatsgalerie Stuttgart 2013, Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien, 2014, Kunsthochschule Hamburg 2014, Gesellschaft für Aktuelle Kunst, Bremen, 2014, Kunstverein Wiesbaden 2014, University of Reading 2013, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich, 2013; Kunsthalle Sao Paolo, 2014; Ostwall Museum Dortmund, 2015, Kibbutz College Tel Aiv, 2015; Universität Lüneburg; 2015; Museum Tinguely in Basel, 2015, Lentos Museum in Linz, 2016), and she is working at the moment on a video archive on curatorial practices together with Ronald Kolb, a collaboration with the ZHdK and the ZKM Karlsruhe.