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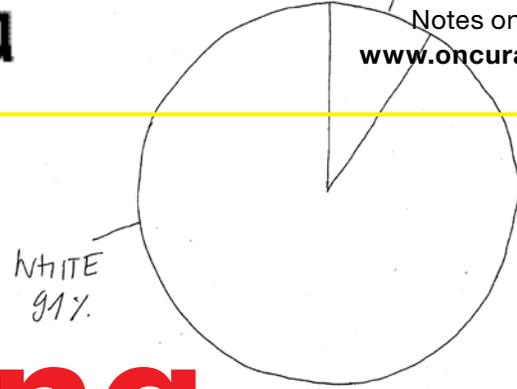
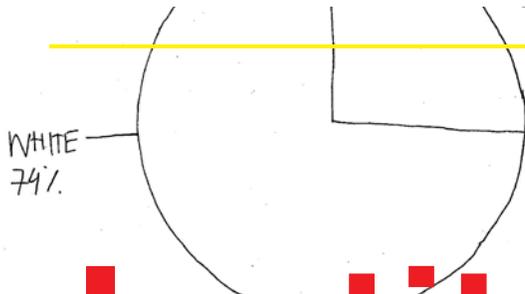
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ONCURATING

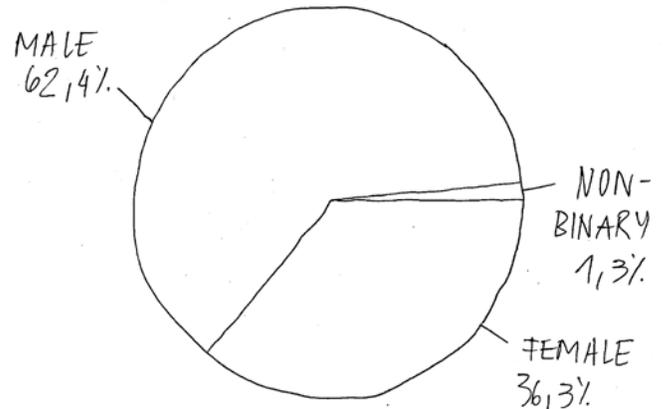
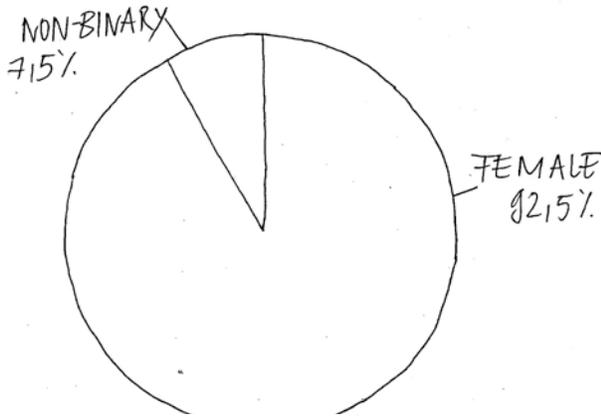
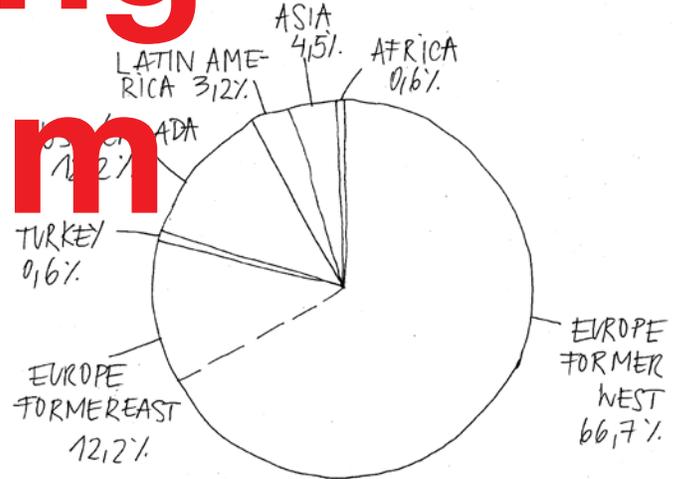
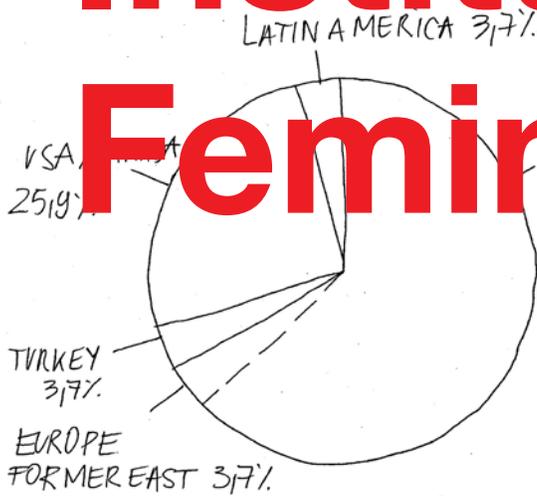
Issue 52 / November 2021

Notes on Curating

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Instituting Feminism



Edited by Helena Reckitt and Dorothee Richter
Contributions by Romane Bernard, Nanne Buurman, Sofia Cécere, Ève Chabanon, Emelie Chhangur, Anna Colin, Angela Dimitrakaki, Berit Fischer, Jennifer Fisher, Thelma Gaster, Nandita Ghandi, Janna Graham, Althea Greenan, Jeanne Guillou, Husseina Hamza, Merete Ipsen, Joyce Jacca, Tracey Jarrett, Daria Khan, Sharlene Khan, La Sala (Alba Colomo and Lucy Lopez), Barbara Lefebvre, Séraphine Le Maire, Oksana Luysen, Rosa Martínez, Alex Martinis Roe, Erin McCutcheon, Rose Moreau, Camille Morineau, Adele Patrick, Madeleine Planeix-Crocker, Jeanne Porte, Laurence Rassel, Helena Reckitt, Maura Reilly, Dorothee Richter, Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps (SKGAL), Nizan Shaked, Cornelia Sollfrank, Ann Sutherland Harris, The Two Talking Yonis, Miska Tokarek, Elena Zaytseva, Catherine de Zegher

ARTISTS IN COLLECTIVES 22.9%

ARTISTS IN COLLECTIVES 9.6%

SOLD ARTISTS 77.1%

SOLD ARTISTS 90.4%

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Instituting Feminism

Helena Reckitt and Dorothee Richter

Encompassing interviews, conversations, single and co-authored articles, and visual essays, “Instituting Feminism” reflects the efforts of curators, artists, and other arts producers to move beyond identifying inequities in the cultural industries to devising tools that can foster structural change. Across the contributions, instituting feminism is envisaged as an active, relational practice, rather than one that seeks to limit feminisms to predefined methodologies or forms.

“Instituting Feminism” grows out of a collaboration between Elke Krasny, Lara Perry, Helena Reckitt, and Dorothee Richter that started in 2016 with the symposium “Curating in Feminist Thought.”¹ In the four conferences that followed—“Unsettling Feminist Curating,” 2017; “Movements in Feminism / Feminisms in Movement: Urgencies, Emergencies and Promises,” 2018; “Affidamento - Creating Feminist Solidarity in Art and Curating,” 2018; and “The Revolution of Digital Languages or When Cyber Turns into Sound of Poetry – A Symposium on Post-Cyber-Feminisms,” 2019—parameters for how feminist values could impact upon the curatorial field and the wider culture were proposed, shared, and discussed.²

An editorial Call for Submissions, circulated in 2019, built on these conferences’ momentum. Under the rubric “Unsettling Feminist Curating,” it sought contributions that explore alliances between feminist curatorial practices and struggles for ecological and social transformation. Noting how the integration of feminism into the art world has been critiqued as much as welcomed, due to the tokenistic “pink-washing” that often accompanies its mainstream embrace, the Call solicited articles that unsettle relations between feminism and conventional events and exhibitions.³

“Unsettling Feminist Curating” produced such a strong international response that the editors decided to expand their plan to edit one collection of essays, to develop three publications. Following this issue of *OnCurating*, two essay collections, *Feminist Curating and Organizing* and *Curating with Care*, edited by Krasny and Perry, will be published by Routledge.

As this issue of *OnCurating* reflects, feminist-inspired art, curatorial projects, and exhibitions have gained heightened visibility over the past decade. Although statistics reveal the continued dominance of white, Eurocentric male artists and agendas,⁴ the interest in feminist artists and curatorial projects, and the growth of women in curatorial and directorial roles, cannot be denied. This profusion of activity should not, however, be taken at face value. For one thing, most women in positions of art world power are white and have been educated at elite Western institutions. This also does not solve the structural problem of the persistent gap between productive labour (not only affective labour of all sorts, but also labour for common goods, like clean water and air) and paid labour.⁵ These structures depend on subjects that are divided along the lines of race, class, and gender. It is also clear that, despite the radicalism of feminist artworks shown and programmes sponsored, the art world is beset with endemic problems. From the exploitation of low-paid feminised labour to the vulnerability of employees of colour, the environmental impact of cultural projects, and museums’ foundations in extractive colonial policies, the reality of how art spaces

operate often differs widely from the progressive environments they may appear to be. The gap between public support for social justice and the working practices and conditions of most arts organisations was demonstrated during the recent #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter protests. While rhetorical statements of solidarity and support were prevalent, few signs of commitment to real progressive transformation and change have emerged.

Confronting the need for change, and building on instructive earlier examples of feminist instituting, contributors to this issue tend to be as concerned with process as they are with product. They pay as much, if not more, attention to internal institutional workings as they do public-facing exhibitions and programmes. Art world terms that are often bandied about, while remaining ill-defined, are pondered and critiqued. From “inclusivity” to “access,” “collaboration” to “care,” contributors scrutinise institutional statements and compare public rhetoric with actual practice.

Section 1 proposes definitions of feminist instituting and feminised labour, and identifies the terrain for struggles to come. **Angela Dimitrakaki** and **Nizan Shaked** challenge the rhetoric of “inclusivity” within feminist and other cultural agendas, calling for a radical rethink of feminist terms of recognition. They argue that the focus on visibly different identities reinforces marginalised subjects, leading to a simplification and reification of collective identities which in turn encourages intolerance, divisiveness, and authoritarianism. By downplaying the politics of class and migration, this emphasis also prevents urgent discussions about the need for wealth redistribution. **Nanne Buurman** highlights the ambivalent histories associated with feminised cultural labour in the context of neoliberal biopolitical power relations. She cautions against a too easy association between curating, cure, and care, pointing out care’s governmental functions and complicity with (neo-)nationalist capitalism. Resonating with Buurman’s critique, and applying it to themselves, **Secretariat for Ghosts (SKGAL)** consider the potential self-exploitation of precarious cultural and academic workers. Their essay and relational map attempt to make visible the conditions of their labour, without becoming fodder for cognitive capitalism. In her bracing text, **Dorothee Richter** warns that feminist instituting will not come without a fight. Detailing the increased influence of wealthy collectors on the contemporary art scene in Zurich, she draws broader implications about the dominance of right-wing authoritarian and militaristic forces that masquerade behind private “support.” Unsurprisingly, the private collections for which the Kunsthau in Zurich offers an exclusive platform encompass positions which are largely white and male, and which support the idea of an autonomous artwork.

Section 2: Theory into Practice: Feminist Instituting Then and Now explores various curatorial, activist, and organisational approaches, from working to transform existing art organisations from within to devising new institutions that learn from the precedents they build on. At the start of **Emelie Chhangur**’s tenure as Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario, she speaks to **Jennifer Fisher** about her concept of “curatorial in-reach.” Contesting traditional one-sided practices of gallery outreach, “in-reach” seeks a more reciprocal, long-term relationship of learning and trust. Growing out of Indigenous consensus practices, this non-extractive model attempts a deep form of hospitality, where the host is transformed through their encounter with the guest. Similarly challenging dominant cultural and political rhetoric, **Janna Graham**, **Hussein Hamza**, **Joyce Jacca**, and **Tracey Jarrett** discuss their work building a community museum-in-the-making. Contesting urban development schemes that undermine, rather than nurture, existing communities, activities they

initiate and objects they gather act as means of collective learning and resistance. “Working from the pockets,” they seek to make visible the ghosts of the Transatlantic slave from which their dockland neighbourhood grew, as well as the feminised work of social production on which their project, and the wider community, depends. This emphasis on conditions of sustenance and sustainability characterises another emerging feminist institution, **La Sala**. Envisaging an arts organisation built around the table that is generative rather than extractive, to the planet as well as themselves, co-founders **Alba Colomo** and **Lucy Lopez** see feminism(s) as “an instituent practice: adaptive, porous, capable of making many worlds[...]. Rather than instituting feminism—fixing it in time, formalising it—we’d rather speak of feminist instituting as an ongoing praxis, something to live by and build with.”

Earlier instances of feminist instituting, alliance-building, and relationality inform the remaining articles in **Section 2**. **Adele Patrick**, in a roundtable with three other seasoned feminist cultural leaders, **Nandita Gandhi**, **Althea Greenan**, and **Merete Ipsen**, explores institutional endurance against the backdrop of instability and threat. Considering how the organisations they have built integrate learning and active engagement as their core, rather than “add-on” components, the women discuss their efforts to adapt and survive, to stay porous and open to discovery. This wide-ranging conversation also broaches issues of professionalism versus DIY, independence versus complicity, and physical versus virtual spaces and archives. Echoing Patrick and co’s concerns with feminist transmission and endurance, **Alex Martinis Roe**, in dialogue with **Helena Reckitt**, discusses the influence of second wave feminism on her artistic approach to building networks of affiliation and support. Presenting and creating a relational model of identity, where subjects come into being through their encounter with others, her long-term art projects aim to nurture intergenerational solidarity and personal and social transformation. A related concern with collective feminist process characterises **Cornelia Sollfrank**’s account of the cyberfeminist Old Boys Network, active from 1997 to 2001. As a network with an open membership and no fixed goal, the OBN inspired new subjectivities, artworks, and activisms that responded to the intersection of genders and emerging technologies. **Berit Fischer** also reflects on how art and curatorial projects can foster emancipatory formations. Her participatory art practice of *Mestiza Consciousness* and *Sentipensamiento* seeks to resist the neoliberal demands of both the event economy and the representational exhibition format, to forge “an activated, embodied and experiential critique.”

Section 3: Curatorial Herstories explores the related projects of curating feminist or women’s art and curating with a feminist agenda or perspective. The section opens with an illustrated essay by **Romane Bernard**, **Sofia Cecere**, **Thelma Gaster**, **Jeanne Guillou**, **Barbara Lefebvre**, **S raphine Le Maire**, **Oksana Luysen**, **Rose Moreau**, **Jeanne Porte**, **Laurence Rassel**, and **Miska Tokarek**. It documents their steps to organise an intersectional feminist exhibition during COVID-19 that embodied values of inclusivity and collectivity: from widely circulating an Open Call to inviting potential exhibitors to take part in a group visualisation exercise. In *Feminist Curating as Curatorial Activism*, six leading curators—**Ann Sutherland Harris**, **Daria Khan**, **Rosa Mart nez**, **Camille Morineau**, and **Catherine de Zegher**—join **Maura Reilly** to reflect on the challenge their ground-breaking projects have posed to dominant curatorial strategies in which a disproportionate emphasis on white, Western cis-male artists perpetuates inequality. Their conversation touches on the difficulties they have faced as feminist curators, the influence of their work, and the dominance of white women in earlier periods of feminist curating. Looking ahead, they discuss the need to widen the public for feminist curatorial projects, and for

structural changes that inaugurate meaningful change. Also taking stock of the ethical dimensions of their work, **Ève Chabanon**, **Anna Colin**, and **Madeleine Planeix-Crocker** consider the complexities of socially oriented art and curating. While sharing their positive experiences of collectivity, support, and creative growth in collaborative art projects, they nonetheless air concerns about the challenges facing social practice. In a culture such as that in the UK, where the government pressures arts organisations to compensate for shortcomings in social care, do arts workers risk taking on responsibilities with under-served groups that exceed their training and experience? How to productively disrupt the conventions of the monographic exhibition is the focus of **Erin McCutcheon's** essay. She reflects on how an exhibition devoted to the practice of feminist artist Monica Mayer replaced the notion of the “retrospective” with that of the “retrocollective.” By embodying the participatory, collective, and grassroots energies out of which Mayer’s art emerged, and the questions and uncertainties that drove it, the exhibition became an active, and activist, space. In her appreciation of the work of Black feminist curator Natasha Becker, **Sharlene Khan** explores how Becker confronted the profound sense of discomfort and exclusion that many people of colour experience visiting museums and art spaces. In contrast, by embracing the South African concept of *ubuntu*—“I am because we are”—Becker has devised curatorial projects informed by empathy and love, which assume the position of being part of, and in community with, others. Curatorial strategies of inclusion are also the focus of the essay by **The Two Talking Yonis**. Taking issue with the curatorial rhetoric and methodology of group exhibition of contemporary women’s art from the Global South, they argue that its emphasis on bodies, identities, and hybridity ends up reinforcing the limiting and fetishising categories to which racialised women have too long been subject. Instead, they argue for the need for a more concerted commitment to exhibitions of Black women’s art in all its complexity, beyond one-off tokenizing and sweeping gestures. In the final essay, **Elena Zaytseva** looks back in order to look forward. Constructing a genealogy of archivally based art by women in Russia, including during the 1980s when feminism was barely spoken of, she shows how the speculative installations of Irina Nakhova imagined futures for art that did not yet exist.

These searching contributions reflect the challenges facing art workers committed to progressive change. Their efforts are necessary, given the resistance to feminist, anti-racist, environmental, and anti-capitalist cultural projects that is now underway. The visibility of these issues, manifest in powerful social movements including #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, #RhodesMustFall, and Climate Emergency, has provoked a conservative backlash, what the UK right-wing media calls a “war on woke.” This new culture war is exacerbated in many regions where widespread cuts to public funding, and increased private influence, place a disproportionate burden on feminised, racialised, and classed subjects to carry out important yet under-valued background cultural and activist work. Anti-feminist obstacles and challenges do not, however, just come from feminism’s external foes, as feminists battle amongst themselves. The divisive struggles around trans-exclusion in feminist space and white-dominance in the art world show that what constitutes “safety” and “access” for one group or person can represent violence and exclusion for others. The feminist projects and perspectives highlighted in “Instituting Feminism” reflect the new subjectivities, caring alliances, and support structures needed to counteract toxic contemporary labour conditions, including those endemic to art and curating. By imagining and implementing new visions for art and the broader society, they hold out promise for more equitable and reciprocal ways of working, producing, and coexisting.

Notes

1 “Curating in Feminist Thought,” Migros Museum and ZHdK, Zurich, 2016. Concept: Elke Krasny, Lara Perry, and Dorothee Richter with fCu (feminist curators united), followed by issue 29 of *OnCurating* on the same theme: www.curating.org/symposium-curating-in-feminist-thought/.

2 “Unsettling Feminist Curating,” 2017, Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, curated by Elke Krasny, Barbara Mahlknecht, Lara Perry, and Dorothee Richter, www.akbild.ac.at/portal_en/institutes/education-in-the-arts/conferences/2017/unsettling-feminist-curating?set_language=en&cl=en; “Movements in Feminism / Feminisms in Movement: Urgencies, Emergencies and Promises,” Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, and Belvedere 21, curated by Elke Krasny with Lara Perry and Dorothee Richter, 2018, <http://stories.belvedere.at/de/aHN31h4j/movements-in-feminism-feminisms-in-movement/>; “Affidamento - Creating Feminist Solidarity in Art and Curating,” 2018, Migros Museum and ZHdK, Zurich, <https://migrosmuseum.ch/en/events/affidamento-creating-feminist-solidarity-in-art-and-curating>, initiated by Elke Krasny, Lara Perry, Helena Reckitt, and Dorothee Richter; and “The Revolution of Digital Languages or When Cyber Turns into Sound of Poetry - A Symposium on Post-Cyber-Feminisms,” 2019, Migros Museum and ZHdK, Zurich, organised by Dorothee Richter and Heike Munder, <https://migrosmuseum.ch/en/events/symposium-the-revolution-of-digital-languages-or-when-cyber-turns-to-sound-of-poetry-a-symposium-on-post-cyber-feminisms-1>.

3 “Unsettling Feminist Curating,” 2019, <https://arthist.net/archive/21679>.

4 See Maura Reilly, “Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes,” ARTnews, (May 16, 2015), <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/taking-the-measure-of-sexism-facts-figures-and-fixes-4111/>

5 See Nancy Fraser, “Contradictions of Capital and Care,” *New Left Review* 100 (July-August 2016): 99-117.

Currently Reader in Curating in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, **Helena Reckitt** has worked as a curator, a public programmer, and an academic editor in the UK, Canada, and the US. She has developed exhibitions, public events, and discursive programmes for organisations including the ICA, London; the Atlanta Contemporary Art Centre, Georgia; and the Power Plant and Nuit Blanche in Toronto. With a longstanding interest in feminist art, writing, and collective practice, since 2015 she has coordinated the Feminist Duration Reading Group, which meets each month to explore under-recognised feminisms. She has recently completed an MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths, and is applying approaches from life writing to her academic and curatorial essays.

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 director of the PhD in Practice in Curating Programme, a cooperation of the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Reading. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, Materialien/Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*. She is executive editor of *OnCurating.org*.

Section 1: Definitions and Urgencies

Feminism, Instituting, and the Politics of Recognition in Global Capitalism

Angela Dimitrakaki and Nizan Shaked

On the Material Conditions of Visibility

We start from the premise of a contradiction that applies more to artists engaged with feminism than to curators engaged with feminism. Despite any and every critique of the autonomy of art, art making is still underwritten by the expectation of autonomy, and autonomy clashes with the professionalisation of artists: that being an artist means making a living as an artist. As far as institutions go, the National Endowment for the Arts in the USA declared, on these very grounds, that “artists are workers” and not “outsiders,” already in 2005.¹ You can enact whatever critique as a feminist artist, but you also need to make your critique available through obtaining an income in the art labour market, of which the market for selling artworks is just a part, and where one can possibly make a living through teaching art, through competing for a grant, through securing a residency, and generally, through making some “cultural capital” transfer into income.² This contradiction is what feminist institutional critique *as an artistic practice* has in common with any other institutional critique as an artistic practice. This contradiction is the opposite of what we call “dialectic” in Marxism, for the conflict between artistic autonomy and the artist’s dependency on the art labour market (defined as above) never leads to a synthesis that moves us forward.

The feminist curator faces a lighter predicament, because despite the autonomisation of her labour through the freelancing of her work under what Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, in 1999, defined as the “new spirit in capitalism,” she is still clearly a professional.³ This is the case even if a curator does not see her profession being limited to a secondary function of just caring about a primary field called art—as implied by the oft-mentioned nowadays etymology of “curator.” Curatorial labour is also pulled towards the “labour of love” field, as a version of autonomous choice/activity, but less so than the work of the artist.⁴ An ethical curator, and we include by default feminist curators in this category, will do anything to pay the artists she is exhibiting a fee and/or help the artists secure at least the production costs for a commissioned piece for a show. This funding needs to come from somewhere. This somewhere is the art labour market—still as defined above, which includes, we stress now, the pivotal role, in most neoliberal national economies, of corporate sponsorship and the arts philanthropy culture in funding exhibitions and/or arts organisations and therefore in sustaining both art and curatorial labour as remunerated work.

How then are the feminist artist and the feminist curator connected? The feminist curator is dedicated to reproducing the contradiction that the feminist artist faces. This has little to do with the political intentions of either. It has to do with the material conditions into which both are locked. Or, more accurately, these are the social relations *as relations of production* into which the feminist artist and the feminist curator are locked as a result of historically specific material conditions. It was already argued by Victor Burgin, back in 1986, only work that is invisible escapes the market, and the feminist curator has defined her salient political cause, which is also her professional activity, as making feminist, and more broadly, women artists visible.⁵ This commitment to visibility has been argued for countless times since the emergence

of the feminist art movement in the 1970s. This commitment to visibility continues today, long after the feminist art movement associated with second-wave feminism has ceased to exist (not, of course, because the movement's goals had been achieved). In the meantime, a most important development has been the rise of intersectional feminism, which has expanded the remit of visibility beyond gender through additional markers, including race and ethnicity, and also sexuality, attached to a politics of recognition.⁶ Often, this politics of recognition enters the art institution (and institutions more broadly) in terms of a demand for "diversity." In this short paper, we want to put forward some observations on how recognition acquires its meaning, how this meaning is manifest in actually existing art institutions, and conclude with a proposition concerning the premises of rethinking recognition in connection with the potential of feminist instituting.

On the Politics of Recognition and the Art Field

The politics of recognition fits the art field perfectly. In fact, insofar as the art field is organised around both the exhibition-form and the competition-form, recognition appears to be the field's default mode of politics. We will not elaborate here on the (actually crucial) question of whether "recognition" is *ontologically* connected to social formations premised on and valuing as positive, inequality and hierarchy. A cursory Derridean test would suggest yes—for recognition becomes meaningful only if paired with its opposites: disregard and even disrepute—which means that the objective of *equal recognition for all* is a non sequitur. For recognition to occur, something must be left unrecognised. Gregory Sholette's famous analysis of the art world as necessarily full of invisible/unrecognised "dark matter" so that the necessarily few stars can be visible/recognised essentially tests this logic and finds it correct.⁷ In other words, recognition is embedded, at best, in the meritocracy culture that marks the bourgeois era overall.

At some point in the evolution of capitalism, however, recognition, via meritocracy, became neoliberalism's major ideological weapon.⁸ This meant that it was, and still is, perceived as central to liberalism, which imagines that a society giving everyone the chance to 'develop' will naturally lead to the best accruing rewards. And so, the *natural inequality that will arise out of culturally ensured equal opportunity* will, in a familiar loop, be the justification for the competition principle (that the market ideology, and especially the deregulated market ideology, needs) to carry on. This is the logic that presently informs all art institutions that are committed to equality and diversity but are forced to also honour the competition principle. It is the culture that strives for inclusivity, while it revels when a figure signifying difference scoops an award.

Given that the contemporary art world formed in the 1990s, which means that it was inaugurated as global in the context of neoliberalism going global after 1989, we are interested in this even more specific analysis of the historical contextualisation of the politics of recognition. Our interest stems from the fact that the politics of recognition bears historic connection with second-wave feminism as the cradle of the feminist art movement. As feminist political theorist Nancy Fraser put it, "In the seventies and eighties, struggles for the 'recognition of difference' seemed charged with emancipatory promise."⁹ And yet, in 2000, one decade into globalisation, Fraser observed that the politics of recognition had served to displace the politics of wealth redistribution.

We are facing, then, a new constellation in the grammar of political claims-making—and one that is disturbing on two counts. First, this move from redistribution to recognition is occurring despite—or because of—an accelera-

tion of economic globalization, at a time when an aggressively expanding capitalism is radically exacerbating economic inequality. In this context, questions of recognition are serving less to supplement, complicate and enrich redistributive struggles than to marginalize, eclipse and displace them. I shall call this the problem of displacement. Second, today's recognition struggles are occurring at a moment of hugely increasing transcultural interaction and communication, when accelerated migration and global media flows are hybridizing and pluralizing cultural forms. Yet the routes such struggles take often serve not to promote respectful interaction within increasingly multicultural contexts, but to drastically simplify and reify group identities. They tend, rather, to encourage separatism, intolerance and chauvinism, patriarchalism and authoritarianism. I shall call this the problem of reification.¹⁰

Twenty-one years later, we hardly need to point that “the problem of reification” has morphed into an exclusionary politics (we cannot examine in this short essay how far such exclusionary politics need to be taken in order to be associated with political developments worthy of the designation “neo-fascism” in certain cases).¹¹ This is not unrelated to the problem of the “acceleration of economic globalisation,” which Fraser mentions. What Fraser could not have foreseen is that this acceleration would lead to a fragmentation of traditional power blocs and the rise of centrifugal tendencies so that, as American hegemony was being increasingly challenged by China, more contenders for a bigger slice of the global pie would seek autonomy (the case of Brexit tied to Britain “going global” should suffice as an illustration).¹²

Has this found expression in the art world? Absolutely. The ‘local’ versus ‘the global’ stance not only did not disappear but, if anything, it now raises fewer eyebrows than in the past. What ‘local’ artists have learned from art biennials and similar periodic mega-shows of a resolute international agenda is that they would be seriously marginalised in such shows while the often scant local resources would also be siphoned to these ‘prestigious’ curatorial projects representing the idea of a global (art) world.¹³ Needless to say that these prestigious curatorial projects would often have notably progressive agendas, including feminist ones. But in a culture play where “recognition” would be given multiple roles, the recognition of women’s achievements might be better represented by an international star than by a local woman artist.

This conflict between local and global did not remain contained in the art biennial ring—key tendencies of the expression of the competition principle in art rarely remain contained. Rather, they tend to find trans-institutional expression. In January 2021, Cara Ober pointed to this conflict in museum acquisition policy. Her article title was phrased as a question: “The BMA [Baltimore Museum of Art] spent \$2.57 million on art by 49 women in 2020. Guess how many are from Maryland?”¹⁴ As you might have guessed, not that many. Ober seems puzzled by this, especially given the efforts made (she provides concrete examples) for conferring visibility to local artists. We are less surprised: ‘the local’ consistently finds its meaning in an art world where ‘the international’ or even ‘the global,’ and certainly ‘the non-local,’ refers not to geography but to a quality that is highly desirable: broad recognition. Standard textbooks, including Julian Stallabrass’s popular *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* from the mid-2000s, describe an art world where internationalism is the principal measure of value.¹⁵ Until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the art world had devised specific mechanisms, including the art biennial phenomenon, that permitted the across-borders *circulation* of a limited number of artists (or artists’ names) versus a mass of ‘local’ artists, who would frequently complain when an international event

would descend on their locality to render visible only their invisibility. It is unclear how and why, in a culture favouring internationalism and the non-local, a museum collection would invest on the carrier of 'lesser value' if it can afford higher value—and by 'culture' we mean the general modality of business: international firms matter more than local ones. The art sector is no different. And where does the imperative of internationalism come from? It comes from capital's necessary attachment and dependency on *growth*. Globalisation as such *is* the form of growth that capitalism achieved at this imperialist point in its development. All this is to say that any expectations about the formal art world (and museums are formal institutions) diverging from the general tendencies of capitalism *at a given moment in its development* need to be taken with a pinch of salt.

Ober, in fact, objected to the acquisition policy by saying: "I do not see any statistical results, or mention of diversity in price point, medium, geographical location, and/or time period, all criteria that would help to measure how much more diverse the BMA's collection is in 2021 versus 2019." But the criteria for a museum that seeks to achieve recognition *for itself* in the competitive museum universe—especially as concerns "geographical location," which Ober chose to highlight in the title of her article—are written in everyone's head through repeated priorities in museum collections, well, elsewhere. We see then the following problem: the translation of the politics of recognition into statistical or other diversity criteria seeks a solution from the top down to a problem that is at the base of the museum's *social relations*, a base that exists underneath its administrative structure.

Is it everywhere the same? The divide between 'world museums' with international collections and 'periphery museums' with local/regional/national collections gives us a clue, as does the fact that not all national collections are equal: those of countries of the 'centre' whose artists signify internationalism are of a higher standing than those of the 'periphery' whose artists signify national identity. Yet, let us look at the matter from a different angle: there is a tendency to separate the European and the American museum structure as the publicly funded versus the privately funded. But this conceals both a simple fact that European governments have been hard at work passing arts funding into private hands, and the even deeper fact that whether wealth is redistributed through taxation or the avoidance thereof (tax foregone in lieu of a nonprofit donation)—in both cases, the state structure for arts funding serves the interests of the upper class. The problem with attending to recognition alone, with attempting to solve white supremacy or misogyny by attending to diversity, is that the system set in place makes efforts pithy. As Ober writes:

In October I inquired about the demographics currently measured in the BMA's collection, and was given records that go back to 2017. The stats revealed a consideration for race and gender but not historic time period vs. contemporary, geography, market presence, medium, gallery affiliation, or price point, which are all issues of diversity and omission the collection should strive to address in the future. There's also an issue of gifts and donations, a prominent way that the museum acquires art. For me, the math doesn't add up here because the majority of donations to the museum continue to prioritize the work of white male artists, with the museum reporting about 60% of donations by white male artists between 2017–2020.

The BMA is, here, a model. We see a similar problem at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that sold a Rothko to diversify the collection, while taking on extended loan a predominantly white-male collection and committing to exhibiting it extensively.¹⁶ And, as we write these lines, the Indianapolis Art Museum at Newfields is under fire for having placed a job ad for a director who would attract “a broader, more diverse audience while maintaining the Museum’s traditional, core, white art audience” (later amended to “traditional core art audience”).¹⁷ Or, let’s note the difficulty of art institutions in cutting ties with a wealthy collector who might be even accused of sexual harassment and “racist imagery.”¹⁸ These are not occasional moral failures on the part of cultural institutions. We know that the art museum has been a site of *sustained* privilege, which is why emancipatory movements have put forward a *political* enquiry about the art institution: one that examines, explains, and critiques power and the interests that the always specific articulation of power serves. In many cases, artists, curators, scholars, and activists have rightly identified the site of discrepancies that relate to the specificity of power at the boardroom, where the limited perspective of wealthy collectors that govern decision-making are steeped in class and self-interest. Their proclivities tend to differ from the constituencies that the inclusive museum purports to serve.

On Recognition and Class

Addressing the problem of structural and institutional racism, Porcia Moore underscores that a body of “cartography” for racial equity in museums already exists, and what is lacking is its implementation. She demands of museums and their governing strata to show us their maps: “Tell us when you replace those board members with community members who reflect your community and/or the representation needed to increase equity, access, and inclusion.”¹⁹ One of several realistic and idealistic demands, what is veiled as an emphasis on the local functions as a structural abolitionist model. Moore wants to see: “Not members who are deemed ‘respectable’, ‘magical’, or ‘vetted’ through your personal social networks. Select members who will challenge and stretch you; not those with social capital that aligns with your views.” The problem remains that board-member social capital only follows in the wake of their actual capital—their wealth and *promise* to remain wealthy—which is dependent upon the staggering poverty of the rest of society. In Europe, the top 1% has 11.3% of the national income against a bottom 50% that has a mere 19.5%; in North America the top 1% has 18.7% of the national income against a bottom 50% that has a mere 13.7%; these figures do not include inherited or other wealth, and it is worse everywhere else.²⁰ These statistics are not a temporary glitch. The Derridean paradigm, where recognition is only enabled by its opposite condition, is, in effect, a manifestation of the concrete contradiction between capitalism and labour. We therefore concur with Fraser that a politics of recognition cut off from the demand for wealth redistribution is a problem for intersectional feminism in its efforts to institute differently.

But if no issue of recognition can be resolved without redistribution, if to resolve the stratified contradictions of the feminist, or abolitionist (aiming to abolish police, prisons, or more) artist and curator we must first resolve the overwhelming problem of capitalism, how can we tackle it, indeed, from the ground up? A wave of boycott campaigns by artists and other art workers has yielded several triumphant removals from board membership (an issue in American art since at least the 1970s), or naming rights, those whose wealth has been made through war, prison, or big pharma profiteering, the destruction of the ecosystem, and so on.²¹ Although we could claim that removal of unethical sponsorship, ultimately, is also symbolic, the power of these political pressures and their outcomes lies in what frightens museums the most: they

are slippery slopes. From the museum's perspective: who knows what type of demands could follow? Indeed, a wave of museum worker unionisation is struggling for fair pay, benefits, and treatment from the USA to Greece. Would these demands be limited to the art field? Where does the art field begin to bleed into the social field?

It is here that compromise is defeat. To quote Angela Davis: "Feminism involves so much more than gender equality. And it involves so much more than gender. Feminism must involve a consciousness of capitalism."²² A press release from the Guerrilla Girls, who cancelled their Phaidon contract because the press is owned by MoMA board member Leon Black, who has strong ties to convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, is a case in point.²³ They ask:

How could Black, a shrewd businessman and guy around town, not have known his money enabled Epstein to continue abusing and trafficking girls right up to his suspicious death in 2019? Was Black complicit? How to explain MoMA's silence? And why does MoMA tolerate people like Black and [Glenn] Dubin on its Board in the first place? If we're stuck with a system where our tax-exempt, educational institutions have to depend on money from the superrich, they should at least choose Board members who make the world a better, not a worse place.²⁴

Despite the Guerrilla Girls' admirable ethical gesture, we need to understand the politics that informs a demand for choosing board members that make the world a better place. Their statement implies, to us at least, that shared interests do exist and that we can all agree on what "better" means. Yet, given many corporations' efforts to sustain climate disaster alone, this assumption seems shaky. Or, in another example, do men who don't generally do housework share interests with women who generally do? And does the capitalist class share interests with the much-expanded today class of precarised workers (including art workers)? Our questions are rhetorical. It is precisely the different and often *antithetical* interests of social groups locked in relations of production and reproduction in the current status quo that have required feminism to define itself as a politics, as a praxis addressing interests and power. The absence of criteria for defining for whom the world might be a better place points to liberalism as the dominant ideology—and through it, the inability of liberalism to imagine itself, let alone act, beyond its dependency on capitalism—which, it believes, can improve if reformed. Committed, at least in principle, to gender, race, sex, and other forms of equality, liberalism is nevertheless steeped in the notion that the system can be fixed using its own critical parameters, and that there is such a possibility of board-member wealth being benign. But, in the current arrangement, board members can either foot the bill, or they can make the world a better place. They cannot do both: the accumulation of wealth is *necessarily* dependent on the immiseration of the vast majority of the earth's population—and note that the statistics of the Global Income Inequality 2021 above do not even touch on the transfer of value from the Global South to the Global North, which also benefits the latter's working population, so that North America and Europe can appear less horrible than the rest of the world.²⁵ What starts as a strong gesture typically ends with weak surrender to the world in which we are 'stuck'.

To become unstuck, we must change the board, demographically and structurally—in effect, to eliminate its existence by *unlinking the body that governs and the body that pays*. The money we need to realise Moore's vision can be made through taxation instead of through philanthropy, for example. This would be a first step, though capital

might well oppose this kind of reform. For, in neoliberalism, not all reforms are acceptable—which is why ‘class’ may feature in sociological analyses of inequality under pressure from intersectionality theory but tends to be dropped from art institutional policy that interprets intersectionality in terms of other markers: sexuality, ethnicity, ableism, ageism, and so on. And yet, the proposed first step would be a pragmatic, immediate solution that would not require nice patrons with ‘benign’ wealth. It doesn’t need patrons at all. Indeed, the question we want to raise is whether more creative solutions might exist if we wouldn’t accept the parameters of the nonprofit system as our only possibility. To recapitulate, a nonprofit system assumes a profit system, and a system driven by a profit imperative is necessarily a drive of immiseration and destruction. From social reproduction analyses to discussions of the rate of profit to fall (TRPF) to critiques of the Global North/Global South divide and of the climate disaster causes, a vast body of literature empirically shows that capitalism can only profit by expropriation and exploitation, if reality itself is not proof enough.²⁶

We understand, of course, that such a proposition, a reconfiguring of the politics of recognition through a consideration of class divides, would test the potential and limits of our democratic apparatuses—for it would indicate that the distribution of positions of power in the highly prestigious realm of art (traditionally bearing a privileged class stamp) might become unmoored from class privilege. And this would be a complicated operation, for class privilege rules both meritocracy (which we mentioned above) and, more broadly, access to specific fields of knowledge (that often relate to the right to be knowledgeable about ‘high’ culture). Not even postmodernism, with its promise of both connecting selected progressive social movements to art and fusing art and popular culture (revealing what Rosalind Krauss called “the myth of originality”), succeeded in ridding us of the recognition of the new and therefore of the imperative to access the knowledge necessary for such recognition.²⁷ The democratisation of the art field has proven to be something more than providing museums with cafés and shops selling posters of artworks or forcing “performance indicators” on the sector in terms of visitor metrics, a trend for now forestalled because of Covid-19. This pause—if it is a mere pause—provides valuable time for a rethinking of if and how the demands of emancipatory social movements have so far been accommodated by a politics of recognition *in the latter’s concrete historical conditions of shaping*. Do the politics of recognition necessarily meet a glass ceiling in the art field that is also the glass ceiling of feminist instituting? Is the glass ceiling metaphor appropriate, or does it itself come from the arsenal of liberalism, always keen to use metaphors that promise at least a fracture if not smashing? Unlike some previous questions we posed, these are not rhetorical ones: we acknowledge that in the absence of a concrete revolutionary prospect, reforms—such as the suggested reform of museum boards—can be a partial way forward. What is a concern, however, is when the reforms that are allowed block the revolutionary imaginary, when they make the horizon shrink to what is strictly visible as the known mechanisms for generating value. A new wave of feminist instituting must start from undoing the politics of recognition as such a mechanism.

Notes

- 1 See NEA, Artists in the Workforce 1990 - 2005, https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/ArtistsInWorkforce_ExecSum.pdf For a critical contextualisation, see Angela Dimitrakaki, “Extensive Modernity: On the Refunctioning of Artists as Producers,” in *A Companion to Modern Art*, ed. Pam Meecham (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017).
- 2 We place “cultural capital” in quotation marks to indicate that we are not referring to capital in the Marxist sense (which is highly specific).

- 3** Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Greg Elliott (London: Verso, 2018).
- 4** On this, see Danielle Child, Helena Reckitt, Jenny Richards, “Labours of Love: A Conversation on Art, Gender, and Social Reproduction,” *Third Text* 31/1 (2017): 147 - 168.
- 5** Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 190. His exact phrasing is “in short, only work which remains *invisible* may remain untouched by money” (emphasis in the original).
- 6** The term is credited to the work of Black feminists and specifically Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), though we would also look back, including to the work of the Combahee River Collective (Boston 1974 -1980). See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Anti-racist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1 (1989): 139-167. See also “The Combahee River Collective Statement” (1977) at <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/combahee-river-collective-statement-1977/>, accessed 15 February 2021.
- 7** Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Verso, 2010).
- 8** Jo Littler, *Against Meritocracy: Culture, Power, and Myths of Mobility* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018).
- 9** Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking Recognition,” *New Left Review* 3 (May/June 2000): 107.
- 10** *Ibid.*, 108.
- 11** On this in relation to art, see the special issue “Anti-Fascism/Art/Theory,” Angela Dimitrakaki and Harry Weeks, eds, *Third Text* 33, no. 3 (2019); and esp. Nizan Shaked, “Looking the Other Way: Art Philanthropy, Lean Government and Econo-fascism in the USA,” and Larne Abse Gogarty, Angela Dimitrakaki, and Marina Vishmidt, “Anti-Fascist Art Theory: A Roundtable Discussion.”
- 12** Indicatively, see Mark Landler, “Boris Johnson’s ‘Global Britain’: Inspired Vision or Wishful Thinking?,” *The New York Times*, 3 July 2020, accessed 12 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/03/world/europe/johnson-brexite-hong-kong.html>.
- 13** The controversy around the impact that *Documenta 14* had on the Athenian art scene is a well-known example. Politician and economist Yanis Varoufakis noted: “Documenta supposedly came to Greece to spend, but instead they sucked up every single resource available for the local art scene. The few resources that Greece’s private and public sectors make available to Greek artists, like the Aegean Airways sponsorship, went to Documenta. The Athens municipality gave Documenta a building for free. Many hotels donated rooms for free. Buildings at the Athens School of Fine Arts were made available for free, and now the graduating students have nowhere to host their degree show.” See Iliana Fokianaki and Yanis Varoufakis, “We Come Bearing Gifts,” *Art Agenda*, June 7, 2017, accessed 29 January 2021, <https://www.art-agenda.com/features/240266/we-come-bearing-gifts-iliana-fokianaki-and-yanis-varoufakis-on-documenta-14-athens>.
- 14** Cara Ober, “The BMA spent \$2.57 million on art by 49 women in 2020. Guess how many are from Maryland?,” *Bmore Art*, 22 January 2021, accessed 29 January 2021, <https://bmoreart.com/2021/01/the-bma-spent-2-57-million-on-art-by-49-women-in-2020-guess-how-many-are-from-maryland.html>.
- 15** Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; new edition 2020). The observations we point to were already made in the book’s original appearance as *Art Incorporated* from 2004.
- 16** Nizan Shaked, “Racial and Economic Inequality: the SFMOMA and the Private Fisher Collection,” College Art Association Annual Conference, 11 February 2021.
- 17** See <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/feb/14/indianapolis-museum-of-art-at-newfields-white-art-audience-job-listing>, accessed 15 February 2021.

18 See Matthew Weaver, “Tate Cuts All Ties with Controversial Patron Anthony D’Offay,” *The Guardian*, 4 September 2020, accessed 15 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2020/sep/04/tate-cuts-all-ties-with-controversial-patron-anthony-doffay>. We call attention, in particular, to the last two paragraphs of this article.

19 Porchia Moore, “Cartography: A Black Woman’s Response to Museums in the Time of Racial Uprising,” *The Inluseum*, 10 June 2020, accessed 29 January 2021, <https://inluseum.com/2020/06/10/cartography-a-black-womans-response-to-museums-in-the-time-of-racial-uprising/>.

20 See Luca Ventura, “World Wealth Distribution and Income Inequality 2021,” *Global Finance*, 11 January 2021, accessed 29 January 2021, <https://www.gfmag.com/global-data/economic-data/wealth-distribution-income-inequality?fbclid=IwAR0ODdJ1aC1-UgaBw55XobCulzz-iA244TnrrWklQWHk65GS5Zplc1fk5vE>.

21 “Disgust with the museum system was at the heart of AWC [Art Workers’ Coalition in the USA], and art institutions were a logical target in artists’ eyes, especially because of their powerful boards of trustees that had members like the Rockefellers,” notes Julia Bryan Wilson in her book, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 28. They built upon the work of Black activists, especially the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition that was formed in 1968 to protest the white supremacy of the Metropolitan Museum. See Bridget R. Cooks, “Black Artists and Activism: *Harlem on My Mind* (1969),” *American Studies* 48, no. 1 (2007): 5-39.

22 Angela Davis, *Feminism & Abolition: Theories & Practices for the 21st Century*, lecture at the University of Chicago, 2013.

23 On 22 March 2021, it was announced that Leon Black was stepping down from his chief executive post at Apollo Global Management, LLC. See Matt Egan, “Billionaire Leon Black is leaving Apollo following scrutiny over ties to Jeffrey Epstein,” accessed 22 March 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/03/22/investing/leon-black-apollo-epstein/index.html>.

24 Hakim Bishara, “Guerrilla Girls Canceled Phaidon Book Deal Over Ties to Leon Black, Jeffrey Epstein Associate,” *Hyperallergic*, 1 February 2021, accessed 1 February 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/618725/guerrilla-girls-phaidon-book-deal-leon-black/>. Glenn Dubin is a billionaire hedge fund manager with close ties to Jeffrey Epstein. Indicatively, see William D. Cohan, “For Billionaire Glenn Dubin, the Epstein Saga Isn’t Over,” *Vanity Fair*, 4 September 2019, accessed 22 March 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2019/09/glenn-dubin-epstein-questions>.

25 On this, see indicatively Zak Cope, *The Wealth of (Some) Nations: Imperialism and the Mechanics of Value Transfer* (London: Pluto Press, 2019).

26 TRPF is a concept that is key to Marxian economics. It says that profit has a tendency to decrease in relation to the capital invested, which constitutes a major problem for capital that therefore needs to constantly expand/grow/enclose/subsume. For an introduction to the concept, see the detailed Wikipedia entry https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tendency_of_the_rate_of_profit_to_fall, accessed 22 March 2021.

27 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985).

Nizan Shaked is professor of contemporary art history and museum and curatorial studies at California State University, Long Beach. Her book, *The Synthetic Proposition: Conceptualism and the Political Referent in Contemporary Art* (Manchester University Press, 2017), is the winner of the 2019 Smithsonian American Art Museum Eldredge Prize for Distinguished Scholarship. Her book, *Museums and Wealth, the Politics of Contemporary Art Collections*, is forthcoming with Bloomsbury Academic in 2021.

Angela Dimitrakaki is a writer and art historian working across Marxism and feminism. Her books include *Gender, ArtWork and the Global Imperative* (2013), *Politics in a Glass Case* (2013, co-edited with L. Perry), and *Economy* (2015, co-edited with K. Lloyd). She co-edited the special issues on social reproduction and art (2017) and antifascism/art/theory (2019) for *Third Text*. She directs the MSc in Modern and Contemporary Art at the University of Edinburgh.

From Prison Guard to Healer: Curatorial Subjectivities in the Context of Gendered Economies

Nanne Buurman

Preface

In their first statement after being nominated as artistic directors of *documenta 15* in 2019, ruangrupa announced that, “If *documenta* was launched in 1955 to heal war wounds, why shouldn’t we focus on today’s injuries, especially the ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures,” thereby invoking the idea of the exhibition as a nurse tending to the wounds inflicted by the respective dominant system. While ruangrupa set out with the important task of radically rethinking the institutional workings of *documenta*, and thereby potentially also reviving the institution whose legitimacy as one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art has increasingly come under scrutiny in the context of a still globalizing art world, today, with COVID-19 very much defining our current situation, I would like to complicate the notion of healing, by calling attention to its ambivalent gendered histories within and beyond *documenta*. In deep sympathy with ruangrupa’s difficult task of working out alternative ways of curating that challenge white patriarchal power and property relations sedimented in traditional “Western” notions of authorship, leadership, and ownership, the following translation of a text written between 2013-2016 in German aims to work against all too comfortable equations of curating/care as purely good things by also shedding light on the dark side of the *cura* and its governmental functions within neoliberal and (neo-)nationalist capitalism.

* * *

Although the curatorial field is increasingly dominated by women, the relationship between gender and curatorial authorship—surprisingly—largely remains a blind spot.¹ This is all the more remarkable if we consider that, complementary to stereotypical associations of artistry with masculinity, structural analogies can be discerned between traditional scripts of femininity and widespread curatorial codes of conduct: beyond the shared etymology of *care work* and curating in the Latin *curare* (to care), the practices of curators and care workers are generally associated with an emphasis on modesty, restraint, and a negation of productivity or creativity of authorship. Moreover, their subject positions have in common an emancipatory trajectory from invisible agents/stagehands behind the scenes of (representational) economies to the role of protagonists that take center stage. My contribution therefore analyzes the gendering of curatorial practices and subject positions against the backdrop of socioeconomic shifts from Fordism to post-Fordism. While the increasing significance of the curatorial vis-à-vis the artistic has already been related to the so-called immaterialization of labor,² my aim is to point out the gender dynamics in this field that have remained largely underexposed so far.³

After an excursus on feminist critiques of gendered (representational) economies, I will look back at the emergence of the figure of the curator as author/ity since the 1970s, using Harald Szeemann as an example to show that this empowerment of the “curator as artist” can be understood as a “masculinization” of curating. In a second step, I will relate curatorial practices and discourses since the 1990s to the intensified biopolitical restructuring of labour and power relations in neoliberal societies, in order to argue that current tendencies of a “refeminization” of curatorial practices and subject positions should not only be understood as a critical intervention in rigid economies of gender, exhibitions, and authorship, but also have to be problematized as potentially complicit with neoliberal governmentality.⁴ Drawing on an example from *DOCUMENTA (13)*, the aim is to relate the ambivalences of curating, already inherent in the Latin word *cura*—whose meaning oscillates between supervising, guarding, and custody, on the one hand, and nursing, healing, and caring, on the other—to sociological diagnoses of a “feminization” of labour and power.⁵

The Biopolitical Turn, or: The “Feminization” of Work and Power

I explicitly do not mean to naturalize gender as an identitarian essence, but to understand it as an economic function socially formed and reformed in historically specific processes of subjectivation that are closely linked to the respective relations of production. Therefore, I am seeking to problematize reasons for the relative persistence of heteronormative attributions and the different ways they are valorized in changing socioeconomic conditions. Theorists of the “feminization” of labour assume that the “feminine” virtues stereotypically attributed to women, such as postponement of gratification, diligence, or a disposition for multitasking and communication, have moved to the fore of social value production with the economic shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. The characteristics of reproductive, affective, care-based, and relational labor, modeled on feminized chores and housework still mostly performed by women without remuneration, also came to play a crucial role in the labour market of service societies and the new economies of symbolic production, where people identified and identifying as female are slowly gaining more power not only in numbers but also in leadership positions. In view of the increasing general normalization of blending life and labour that used to primarily concern housewives and mothers in the bourgeois separation of spheres, various theorists assume a homology between feminine *habitus* and the imperatives of post-Fordist economies, as expressed, for example, in the expectation to emotionally identify with one’s work out of passion.⁶

Against the backdrop of the biopolitical restructuring of the relations of production aimed at the economic exploitation of the entirety of life and no longer only the labour power carried to market, it is important to take into account not just the problematic precarization of labour but also the instrumentalization of femininity as soft power. To what extent do constructions of femininity, or a generalization of traditionally feminine-coded forms of subjectivity and practice, assume certain governmental functions? Michael Hardt and Toni Negri emphasize that they could “accept the term ‘feminization’ [...] only with bitter irony, since it has not resulted in gender equality or destroyed the gender divisions of labor.”⁷ This is why they prefer to speak of a “biopolitization of production.”⁸ In this expression, they link Michel Foucault’s concept of biopower, Karl Marx’s concept of living labor, and Gilles Deleuze’s reflections on societies of control to insights of Marxist feminists, such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, or Selma James, about the productivity of reproductive labor.⁹ Since in postindustrial capitalism the center of gravity of economic value creation shifts from the production of commodities to the re/production of lives and subjectivities, with

power increasingly operating economically based on the model of family and household management,¹⁰ one could argue that both labour and power are feminized in neoliberalism because they refer to the reproduction and management of life in the sense of political economy.¹¹ The biopolitical turn of emphasis from disciplinary to control societies, from the securing of territory to voluntary self-regulation of subjects, implies more diffuse, less authoritarian but by no means less effective forms of exercising authority that nevertheless, of course, coexist with older, more disciplinary and necropolitical paradigms of power.¹²

The Exhibition-as-Medium, or: Institutional and Feminist Critiques of the (Representational) Economy

Such an infrastructural understanding of power as a set of material and immaterial protocols that form subjects and guide their practices in sometimes barely noticeable ways may be linked to the ways power is exercised in exhibitions. Since the 1990s, the notion of the exhibition-as-a-medium has been used to highlight the often implicit authority inherent in curatorial constellations or institutional framings. Because both exhibitions and femininity are discussed as conditions of the possibility for masculinity/artistry to appear as autonomous sources of creativity and value, I propose to read this ascription of mediality in analogy to feminist readings that identified the social function of femininity in patriarchy as mirror, stage, or ornament.¹³ In the gendered economies of representation, “woman” and “exhibition” function as an unobtrusive background, contrasting foil, or support structure that allows “man”/artist to become visible as an authority in the first place. In *The Power of Display*, Mary Anne Staniszewski, for example, describes the contribution of installation design to the production of meaning in exhibitions as “the unconscious of art history.”¹⁴ The name of her publication, *The Power of Display*, sounds like an echo of Luce Irigaray’s essay title, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine.”¹⁵ In her book, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray in fact describes the function of the feminine in phallogocentric discourse in a manner that reads like the description of an exhibition.¹⁶

In this sense, the idea of the Victorian “angel in the house” as a perfectly restrained host, remaining in the background to provide the stage for the representation of the master of the house, is comparable to the white cube model—both curatorial and female hospitality were expected to remain in the background. The *backgrounding* of women as *passepartout*, or display, can also be observed in the tradition of the representation of Virgin Mary—particularly in the form of icons of Madonna with Child, in which she usually functions as the stage/frame/parergon of God’s fatherless son. As I have pointed out in my article “Angels in the White Cube,” the myth of Immaculate Conception corresponds here with the ostensible purity, innocence, and neutrality of the white cube as a prototypical exhibition space, whose interpretive power of meaning-making has long been a blind spot.¹⁷

Against this background, institution-critical exposures of invisible curatorial authorship (such as critiques of the apparent neutrality of the white cube) and feminist demands for recognition of the contribution of hitherto unconsidered affective, domestic, and reproductive labour to the social creation of value, may be compared even if these two critical projects have had different thrusts and varying degrees of success since they started in the 1970s.¹⁸ Mierle Laderman Ukele’s *Maintenance Art* performances, during which she publicly cleaned exhibition spaces and thus problematized invisibilized feminized maintenance work, operate precisely at the intersection of these two areas.¹⁹ (figs. 1a & b) While the visibilization of curatorial agency since the 1970s and increasingly since the 1990s has been accompanied by a signifi-



Figs. 1a & b: Mirle Laderman Ukeles, *Hardford Wash: Washing Tracks. Maintenance Inside*, 1973. Copyright: Laderman Ukeles/Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. Source: Miwon Kwon: „In Appreciation of Invisible Work. Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the ‘White Cube’, in: *Documents*, No. 10, Fall 1997, p. 15-18.

cant valorization of curating as a creative practice that is linked to considerable symbolic capital, this has not been equally the case for feminized domestic labor, care work, or childcare. Rather, in the course of women’s increasing entering of public labour markets, they are either left with a double burden, or care labour is delegated to less privileged women, often migrant workers from the Global “South,” who thus represent the material unconscious of increasingly informatized “Western” societies.²⁰

From Care to Creation, or: The Authorial Ennoblement of the Curator as “Masculinization”

As I have tried to show so far, the etymological meaning of the Latin *curare* (to care) calls up feminized responsibilities of *care-work* (of worrying, caring, nurturing), which are lost in the topos of the curator-as-artist that has gained prominence since the 1970s. In their study, “From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*: Inventing a Singular Position,” Nathalie Heinich and Michael Pollak found that pre-authorial custodial curating was characterized by “a tendency towards the erasure of the person in the post”.²¹ They find “traces of this form of abnegation” in “the voluntary assumption of those traits deemed appropriate for a curator—reserve, modesty, discretion.”²² Also noting a “sacrifice of wealth and fame,” they explain a relatively low income in relation to the high level of education of the post holders by, among other things, “the high proportion of women curators [...], the legacy of a time when those who held the posts, recruited from the financially and culturally privileged sector of society, could well afford to perform their tasks on a benevolent basis.”²³ Against the background of this description of curatorial work as a feminized labour of love, the authorial ennoblement of curating by exhibition makers such as Harald Szeemann since the 1970s appears as a “masculinization” of curatorial practice that casts the

curator as a charismatic meta-artist or exhibition-maker, whose tasks are no longer understood as ‘merely’ reproductive invisible maintenance of the museum, caring for collections, and conservation of exhibits, but as hyper-visible creative production of exhibitions as “works of art,” modeled on myths of artistic genius.²⁴

Dorothee Richter has analyzed a photograph showing Szeemann surrounded by male and female artists on the last day of *documenta 5* (1972) as a gendered pose that refers to historical patterns of representing divine, royal, male creativity in pictures of *primus inter pares* that link masculine creativity and power.²⁵ (figs. 2a & b) Although the emergence of the topos of the curator as meta-artist in the context of *d5* historically coincides with deconstructions of singular authorship by poststructuralists, feminists, and institutional critique, the objections to the curator as meta-artist have remained remarkably formulaic since. Rather than problematizing modernist and romantic conceptions of authorship informed by the idea of genius and *creatio ex nihilo*, they criticized curators as competitors who threaten to infringe the authority, autonomy, and intentions of artists.²⁶ Against this background, it is not surprising that apologetic declarations of innocence or ostentatious reticence on the part of curators of any gender are still widespread today.

In any case, the emphasis on working behind the scenes and the assurance that the artists are the center of attention are common in descriptions of curatorial codes of conduct, both by curators themselves and by others, although these stereotypical and normative claims are not always consistent with reality.²⁷ In fact, it seems that curators read as female are more often praised in the press (sometimes counterfactually) for their efficient, professional, and reserved management skills, while curators read as male are either celebrated as creative charismatic mavericks or criticized for their heretical presumption of artistry. It is therefore no coincidence that only recently have efforts been made to establish Lucy Lippard as a “pioneer of curating,” thus adding a female figurehead to the hitherto male-dominated historical canon.²⁸ In this auto/biographical project, female-coded affirmations of modesty and male-coded analogies



Fig. 2a: Harald Szeemann on the last day of *documenta 5*, 1972. Photograph by: Balthasar Burkhard. Source: *Museum der Obsessionen. Von/über/zu/mit Harald Szeemann*, Berlin 1981, p. 74.



Fig. 2b: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev mimicking Szeemann's pose in preparation of *dOCUMENTA (13)*, 2011. Photography by: Oliver Mark. Courtesy of Oliver Mark.

with artistry intersect in remarkable ways. In her retrospective account of how she assumed an authorial role as a curator, Lippard complies with feminized scripts of modesty by remarking almost apologetically that she did not seize curatorial authorship voluntarily, but only accidentally: “Curation became unintentionally creation.”²⁹ The dematerialization of art, which she accompanied as a curator and art critic in the 1970s,³⁰ was eventually followed by a “dematerialization of curating” in the 1990s that can be linked to what I suggest to call a “refeminization” of curatorial subjectivity.

Hard Facts/Soft Skills, or: The Dematerialization of Curating as “Refeminization”

In a continuously globalizing art field with ever new biennials, curating has established itself as a paradigmatic mode of post-Fordist immaterial production, which no longer requires authorial ennoblement by analogy with masculinized artistic role models, but has acquired model character itself.³¹ This is evident not only in the fact that artists increasingly make use of curatorial strategies and forms of practice, but also in the phenomenon of celebrity curators, who—especially if they are men—continue to be portrayed in the mainstream media as charismatic career changers and *self-made men* in accordance with traditional notions of artistry.³² This focus on singular male autodidacts, however, stands in stark contrast to the post-heroic plurality of a mostly female student body in curatorial training programs.³³ In the discourses around the social, reflexive, discursive, and educational turns of curating that we have seen since the 1990s and increasingly since the 2000s, women increasingly make an appearance as curators and theorists of the curatorial. Whereas previously exhibitions were often treated as the work of charismatic exhibition makers, authors such as Beatrice von Bismarck now make a case for focusing on the

activity of curating, or even on the field of the curatorial, not on the person of the curator.³⁴ Moreover, exhibitions are now increasingly negotiated as social spaces of multilateral meaning production, in which the constitutive role of the audience is also taken into account more than before.

Marion von Osten, Ute Meta Bauer, Dorothee Richter, Maria Lind, Beatrice von Bismarck, and Irit Rogoff are just some discursively powerful positions from Germany/Europe whose work coincides with a questioning of centralist notions of curatorial agency. Bauer's and Lind's practices have recently been the subject of monographs³⁵; Richter has been editing the online journal *OnCurating* for several years³⁶; and Rogoff and von Bismarck have published important anthologies on questions of the curatorial.³⁷ Almost all of these women are/were also involved in leading and/or initiating curatorial studies programs. Therefore, it is perhaps not too far-fetched to read the professionalization of curating through institutionalized courses also as a gendered practice of mediation and re/production. While this turn towards a professionalized education for curators has opened up potentials for a meta-reflexive theorization and dematerialization of the curatorial as an intervention into given gendered (representational) economies, divisions of labour and power relations (and thus could be understood as a project that implicitly follows feminist agendas), it is nevertheless also important to consider the ambivalent effects of power inherent in every form of subjectivation as a practice of social re/production. The discursive shift in focus from *hard facts* to *soft skills*, from exhibitions as "works of art" to exhibitions as "spaces of action," from objects to processes of subjectivation³⁸ that has been taking place since the 1990s not only shows a correlation between "curatorial practices and neoliberal management models" as von Bismarck and others have pointed out,³⁹ but it also coincides with a feminization of the relations of production and power relations in post-Fordism.

The Ambivalence of *Cura*, or: From Curator-as-Prison-Guard to Curator-as-Healer

Since, in neoliberal societies, the potentials of self-empowerment and the pitfalls of precarization go hand in hand, and emancipation vacillates between libertarian liberation and precarious self-exploitation, it is necessary to take a critical look at the ambivalence of *cura* in cognitive capitalism. In his lectures on the history of governmentality, Foucault noted that neoliberal regimes no longer operate like disciplinary power by means of enclosure, but by ensuring freedom of trade and circulation.⁴⁰ He identified pastoral power as a "prelude to governmentality" and describes it as a "power of care" and of healing, for "the pastor is not fundamentally or primary a judge; he is essentially a doctor, who has to take responsibility for each soul and for the sickness of each soul."⁴¹ The model of the shepherd, responsible for the whole flock and each individual sheep (*omnes et singulatim*), who must tend to the sheep without imprisoning them or restricting their movement, shows the ambivalence of this gentle non-phallic power, which anticipates the *laissez-faire* "ideology of freedom" and self-regulation of markets and people in neoliberalism.⁴²

According to Foucault, pastoral power implies an "individualization by subjection," resulting in a "mode of individualization that not only does not take place by way of affirmation of the self, but one that entails destruction of the self."⁴³ And while, according to Foucault, the pastoral power of priests as shepherds of their parish implied that they were both guards and healers at once, because they are guarding the sheep (*custodire gregem*) and taking care of them (*fovere oves*), I would like to illustrate the shift that has occurred in the way power is ascribed to curators by two letters written by artists that could not be more different in their modes of address.

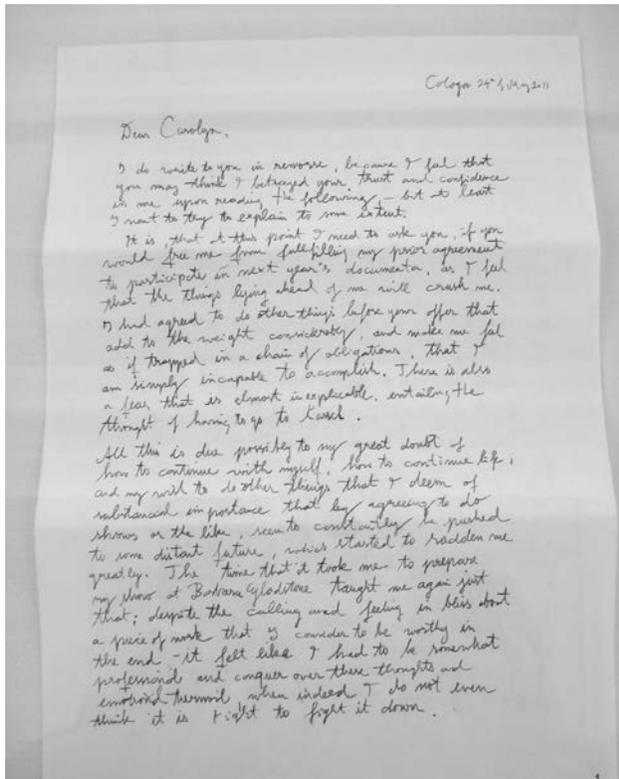


Fig. 3a: Kai Althoff's letter of withdrawal to Carolyn Christoph-Bakargiev, Photography by: Nanne Buurman



Fig. 3b: Vitrine in Museum Fridericianum with Althoff's letter of withdrawal, Photography by: Nanne Buurman

In 1972, Robert Smithson explains his withdrawal from *documenta 5* with a critique of the disciplinary powers of the curator Harald Szeemann, who allegedly infringes the autonomy and freedom of the artist in a “cultural prison.” Titled “Cultural Confinement,” Smithson’s letter of withdrawal was included in *documenta*’s catalogue:

Cultural confinement takes place when a curator imposes his own limits on an art exhibition, rather than asking an artist to set his limits. Artists are expected to fit into fraudulent categories. Some artists imagine they’ve got a hold on this apparatus, which in fact has got a hold of them. As a result, they end up supporting a cultural prison that is out of their control. Artists themselves are not confined, but their output is. Museums, like asylums and jails, have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called ‘galleries.’ A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. [...] It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom.⁴⁴

Here, the idea that artists should set their own limits is expressed as an unfulfilled demand, prohibited by a dominant imposing curator disempowering the artwork.

In 2012, in contrast, Kai Althoff excuses his inability to participate in the exhibition in a long “love letter” to Carolyn Christoph-Bakargiev, which was displayed in a vitrine in the Museum Fridericianum during *documenta 13*. (figs. 3 a & b) Over five written pages, he apologizes for having taken on more obligations than he could possibly manage to attend to and seems to be suffering from his own mismanagement. Rather than blaming or criticizing the curator, the institution, or the system, as Smithson had



Fig. 4a: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev with her dog Darsi, Photographer unknown, Source: Internet.

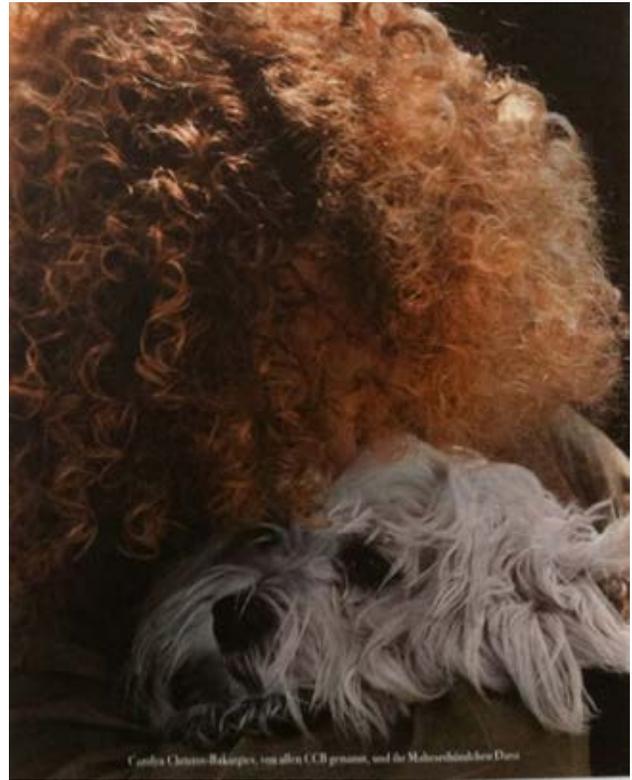


Fig. 4b: Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev with her dog Darsi, Photography by: Andri Pol. Source: Hanno Rauterberg's article, "Die Heilerin," *Zeit Magazin*, 6. June 2012, no. 24, 16-18, 17.

done forty years earlier, he takes all responsibility on himself, while flattering and praising Christoph-Bakargiev's wisdom and kindness:

Dear Carolyn,

I do write to you with remorse, because I feel that you may think I betrayed your trust and confidence in me upon reading the following—but at least I must try to explain to some extent. It is, that at this point I need to ask you, if you would free me from fulfilling my prior agreement to participate in next year's documents, as I feel that the things lying ahead of me will crush me. I had agreed to other things before your offer that add to the weight considerably and make me feel as if trapped in a chain of obligations that I am simply incapable to accomplish. [...] I can only hope you will not judge me wrongly, as I was fully taken by your ways and your wisdom I could feel throughout all of our conversation. And for the most part, it is your knowledge and profound thinking which intimidate me also. [...] I am in deep admiration. But I cannot force myself to equal and put up with your brilliance [...] because of a resistance within me that keeps me from devoting myself equally to this commitment, because I simply cannot master. I have agreed to do too much in the upcoming year, when secretly I now almost wish not to have said yes to anything. [...]

With true admiration,
Kai⁴⁵

This painfully self-revealing confession, anachronistically written by hand, is most likely an artistic play and intended as Althoff's work proper rather than a serious withdrawal. This gesture of displaying a letter that sounds as if the artist was close to burnout reflects on the condition of self-exploitation that artists and other cultural producers have to operate in as Foucauldian entrepreneurs of the self, easily leading to depression, as Franco Berardi has problematized in his book *Soul at Work*.⁴⁶ It reveals that, due to the biopoliticization of production, it is no longer merely the work of art that is subject to enclosure/valorization by the institution but the entire person of the artist, including their private distress and sorrows. Moreover, it demonstrates the self-responsibilization of individuals under the *New Spirit of Capitalism*, in which artists (like workers) are no longer supposed to criticize the institutions they work for but are expected identify with it to the degree of a Stockholm syndrome with the curator.⁴⁷ What is on display here is the governmentality of societies of control, in which curators no longer need to be prison wardens because their relationships to artists are governed by affective ties that are perhaps as effective as the electronic leash, which—according to Deleuze—secures the freedom of movement in societies of control.⁴⁸ (figs. 4a & b) The artist feels “trapped” but not by the institution's powers or curator's dominance but by his own obligations and therefore does not emancipate himself by declaring his independence but submissively asks the curator to set him free.

Conclusion

Against this background, one may wonder to what extent the white cube, which Christov-Bakargiev also called a “space of emancipation” in the context of *DOCUMENTA (13)* (2012),⁴⁹ might be understood as a neoliberal *smooth space* in which the benevolent curatorial smile conveys the impression of freedom from domination through the use of barely noticeable *soft power*? Given the biopolitical deployment of femininity that is gaining ground everywhere, is it perhaps no coincidence that the metaphor of the “curator as prison guard,” coined by Robert Smithson when he accused Szeemann of “cultural confinement,” during *documenta 5* (1972),⁵⁰ has been replaced by talk of the curator as healer,⁵¹ Hanno Rauterberg's epithet for Christov-Bakargiev in his article “Die Heilerin.” Highlighting that CCB is one “of those torn people,” “who like to control everything without fixing anything” and mentioning that some of her colleagues are afraid of her, calling her a “mini-Mubarak of Kassel,” Rauterberg quotes her in his portrait as saying, “But it's not about violence, really. If it's about anything, it's healing.”⁵² Taking into account the ambivalence of *cura*, however, it remains to be seen to what extent a re-feminizing of curatorial agency will help to heal the diseases of biopoliticized capitalism or whether, as a pastoral caregiver, feminized curatorship can only provide relief from the symptoms while sexist, racist, and classist exclusions and inclusions persist behind the friendly face of power.

* * *

Postscript

As significant social and political changes occurred since this article was first published in 2016, I would like to add a postscript from the perspective of early 2021. While it is important to remain mindful of the manifold ways femininity is deployed in the biopolitical regimes of cognitive capitalism, the re-erection of phallic Machiavellian models through figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, Victor Orbán, or US President Donald Trump—whose 2016 election has been explained as a reaction to various kinds of feminization—exposes the ambivalence of different forms of authority and their

historically shifting normative implications. One year ago, COVID-19 opened a new chapter of biopolitics, with health-induced states of exception putting governments into the positions of doctors who authoritatively ask their subjects to remain patient for their own good, thus turning them into patients. At the same time, while appealing for mutual care and individual responsibility of citizens, police are mobilized by the state to enforce rules and regulations that are not always democratically legitimized, thus once more painfully demonstrating that the regimes of power differentiated in gendered terms above are not mutually exclusive but actually work hand in hand. Without knowing yet how these developments will impact processes of subjectivation and relations of power in the curatorial field, once exhibitions reopen, we are certainly witnessing a trend of the concept of healing in the curatorial field, as more and more curators identify with the role of the healer and frame their practices as attempts at healing the ills of (corona-)capitalism.⁵³ Against this backdrop, it is important to remain cautious against depoliticizing detournements of feminist agendas into sedatives causing amnesia about the fact that the bitter pill of (in)voluntarily serving capitalism in its different guises is sugared by the sweet promises of inclusion, representation and power.

Notes

1 This article was originally written in German between 2013-2016. See “Vom Gefängniswärter zur Heilerin. Kuratorische Autorschaften im Kontext vergeschlechtlichter Ökonomien,” *Kritische Berichte* 4, Special Issue *Gender*, no. 44 (2016): 114-121. At the time, gender was primarily addressed in terms of exhibition content, identity politics, and affirmative action in the discourses around feminist curating. See, for instance, Katrin Kivimaa, ed., *Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2013); Elke Krasny, ed., *Women’s Museum: Curatorial Politics in Feminism, Education, History and Art* (Vienna: Löcker Verlag, 2013); or Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, eds., *Politics in a Glass Case* (Liverpool: University Press, 2013), 131–56. Meanwhile, gender dynamics in the field of curating have been receiving more attention. See, for instance, the special issue “Curating in Feminist Thought” edited by Elke Krasny, Lara Perry, and Dorothee Richter, *OnCurating* 29 (May 2016).

2 See Beatrice von Bismarck, “Kuratorisches Handeln. Immaterielle Arbeit zwischen Kunst und Managementmodellen,” in Beatrice von Bismarck and Alexander, eds., *Beyond Education. Kunst, Ausbildung, Arbeit und Ökonomie*, Koch (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2005), 175-190.

3 See also my more recent articles: “Engendering Exhibitions: The Politics of Gender in Negotiating Curatorial Authorship,” *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 115-137; “Home Economics. Curating as a Labour of Love,” *Esse. Arts and Opinions*, 30, Special Issue “Feminisms” (May 2017); and my review “(Un)doing Curatorship, oder Kuratorin werden,” *FKW* 67 (April 2020).

4 For the concept of governmentality, see Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78, ed. Michael Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); and idem., *The Birth of Biopolitics*, lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

5 See Cristina Morini, “The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism,” *Feminist Review*, no 87, (2007): 40-59, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 145-163, and Hardt and Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge/London, Harvard UP: 2001).

6 See Nancy Fraser, “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History,” *New Left Review* 56 (March/April 2009): 97-117.

7 Hardt and Negri, *Commonwealth*, 133.

8 Ibid.

9 See Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Walls Press, 1975); Maria-rosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972). For a feminist critique of Hardt and Negri, see Kathy Weeks, "Life Within and Against Work: Affective Labor, Feminist Critique and Post-Fordist Politics," *ephemera* 7, no. 1 (2007): 233-49.

10 Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 93-103.

11 Michel Foucault, *Der Wille zum Wissen. Sexualität und Wahrheit I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 163.

12 See Marianne Pieper, Thomas Atzert et al., "Einleitung," in idem., eds., *Empire und die biopolitische Wende. Die Internationale Diskussion im Anschluss an Hardt und Negri* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus, 2007), p.12.

13 See Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), 44; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

14 Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, (Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 1998), xix- xxix, here xxi.

15 Irigaray, "The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine," in idem., *The Sex Which is Not One* (Ithaca/New York: Cornell UP, 1985), 68-85.

16 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 138.

17 See Nanne Buurman, "Angels in the White Cube. Rhetoriken kuratorischer Unschuld," *FKW/Zeitschrift für Geschlechterforschung und visuelle Kultur*, no 58 (April 2015): 63-74. For an English version, see: "Angels in the White Cube. Rhetorics of Curatorial Innocence," *OnCurating* 27, Special Issue *Curating in Feminist Thought* (May 2016): <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/angels-in-the-white-cube-rhetorics-of-curatorial-innocence-at-documenta-13.html#YDqLtOAxnOQ>. Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Santa Monica and San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1986).

18 The activists of the *Wages for Housework* campaign, founded in 1972, fought for recognition of housework as productive work. See Kitchen Politics (Collective für Queer Feministische Interventionen), eds., *Aufstand aus der Küche. Reproduktionsarbeit im globalen Kapitalismus und die unvollendete feministische Revolution* (Münster: edition assemblage, 2015).

19 See Miwon Kwon, "In Appreciation of Invisible Work. Mierle Laderman Ukeles and the Maintenance of the 'White Cube,'" *Documents*, no. 10 (Fall 1997): 15-18, here 18.

20 See Morini, "The Feminization of Labour," 42.

21 Heinich and Pollak, "From Museum Curator to Exhibition *Auteur*," in Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne, eds., *Thinking about Exhibitions* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 231-250, here 234.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 See Søren Grammel, *Ausstellungsautorenschaft. Die Konstruktion der auktorialen Position des Kurators bei Harald Szeemann* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2005).

25 Richter, "Künstlerische und Kuratorische Autorschaft," in Corina Caduff and Tam Wälchli, eds., *Autorschaft in den Künsten. Konzepte, Praktiken, Medien*, (Zurich: ZHDK, 2008), 110-127, 112.

26 Cf. Dirk Schwarze, *Die Expansion der documenta-Kritik. Eine Ausstellung im Spiegel der Presse*, ed. by Walter Vitt (Nordlingen: 2006).

27 See Buurman, "Angels in the White Cube. Rhetorics of Curatorial Innocence."

28 In *A Brief History of Curating*, edited by Hans Ulrich Obrist, Zurich 2009, a book containing interviews with "pioneers of curating," Lippard is one of only two women interviewed. See also Cornelia Butler, ed., *From Conceptualism to Feminism: Lucy Lippard's Number Shows 1969-7* (London: Afterall, 2012).

- 29** Lippard, "Curating by Numbers", *Tate Papers*, no. 12 (2009). Accessed on September 11, 2016, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/curating-by-numbers>.
- 30** See Lippard and John Chandler, "The Dematerialization of Art," in: idem., *Changing. Essays in Art Criticism*, (New York: Dutton, 1971) 255-276; idem., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).
- 31** See for instance von Bismarck "Kuratorisches Handeln," and Dorothea von Hantelmann, "Affluence and Choice. The Social Significance of the Curatorial," in Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff and Thomas Weski, eds., *Cultures of the Curatorial* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2012), 41-51.
- 32** See, for example, Anja Lösel, "Klaus Biesenbach. Unser Mann in New York," Jan. 16, 2007, <https://www.stern.de/kultur/kunst/klaus-biesenbach-unser-mann-in-new-york-3361532.html>, accessed Sept. 11, 2016.
- 33** See Suhail Malik, "Survey on Gender Ratios in Curating Programs," *Red Hook Journal* (October 2012), <https://ccs.bard.edu/redhook/survey-on-gender-ratios-in-curating-programs/index.html>, accessed September 11, 2016.
- 34** See von Bismarck, "Kuratorisches Handeln," 183-185.
- 35** Marius Babias for the NBK, ed., *Ute Meta Bauer: Kuratorische Praxis. Interviews und Gespräche*, (Cologne: n.b.k/Walther König, 2012); Brian Kuan Wood, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writings*, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2010).
- 36** See www.on-curating.org
- 37** von Bismarck, Schaffaff, Weski, eds., *Cultures of the Curatorial* and Jean-Paul Martinon, ed., *The Curatorial: A Philosophy of Curating* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
- 38** Suzana Milevska, "Participatory Art. A Paradigms Shift from Objects to Subjects," <https://www.eurozine.com/participatory-art/>, accessed September 11, 2016.
- 39** von Bismarck, "Kuratorisches Handeln", my translation from the German.
- 40** See Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 40-41.
- 41** Ibid., 184, 127, 247
- 42** Ibid., 48.
- 43** Ibid., 180.
- 44** Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," Manifesto first published in the exhibition catalogue of *documenta 5* (1972) in German, English version published in *Artforum* 11, no. 2 (October 1972).
- 45** Kai Althoff, Letter of Withdrawal to Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev (excerpt), displayed at *DOCUMENTA (13)* (2012).
- 46** Franco Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (Los Angeles, Cambridge, London: Semiotexte/MIT Press, 2009).
- 47** Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello. "The New Spirit of Capitalism," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 18:3 (2006), 161-81.
- 48** Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control" [1990], *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992): 3-7.
- 49** Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in conversation with Ralf Schlüter, "Das Herz der documenta schlägt in Kabul," *Art Spezial. Documenta 13* (July 2012): 96-98, here 98, my translation from the German.
- 50** Robert Smithson, "Kulturbeschränkung," in: *documenta 5. Befragung der Realität. Bildwelten heute*, exhibition catalogue, Kassel 1972, Dossier 17:7.
- 51** Hanno Rauterberg, "Die Heilerin," *Zeit Magazin*, no. 24, 6. June 2012, 16-18.
- 52** Ibid., 16, my translation from the German.
- 53** Besides *documenta 15*, the upcoming Ghetto Biennale *Swen Moun (Heal People)*, which also seeks to compensate for insufficient health services by the Haitian state with the *Ghetto Clinic*, is another very explicit example. See also my current and upcoming work on "Hegemonies of Healing and Their Discontents," in which I link

historical life-reform attempts to cure capitalism with contemporary ones to call attention to the dialectics of care/curation. The idea of curating as healing may in fact also serve curators as a means of self-purification to downplay their complicities with regimes of power, as it did for a number of the documenta founding fathers, for whom documenta's ostentatively reparative agenda was an ideal occasion to whitewash not just their own Nazi pasts, but also that of participating German artists and audiences. See Buurman, "The Exhibition as a Washing Machine? Some Notes on Historiography, Contemporaneity, and (Self-)Purification in documenta's Early Editions," in *Stasis. Taking a Stance*, Catalogue of the Thessaloniki Biennale 2019 (MoMus, 2020), idem. "Northern Gothic: Werner Haftmann's German Lessons, or A Ghost (Hi)Story of Abstraction," *documenta studies* 11 (December 2020), https://documentastudien.de/media/1/documenta_studies__11_nanne_buurman.pdf, and idem. "d is for democracy? documenta and the Politics of Abstraction between Aryanization and Americanization," *Modos Journal, Revista de história da arte* 5, no. 2 (May-August 2021), <https://periodicos.sbu.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/mod/article/view/8665413>.

Nanne Buurman is an author, editor, curator and educator employed/working as an associate researcher and lecturer for documenta and exhibition studies at the Kunsthochschule Kassel, where she has been part of the team building the documenta Institut since 2018. In that capacity, she was involved in founding the Transdisciplinary Research Center for Exhibition Studies *TRACES* and is currently co-heading a research group on Nazi continuities at documenta. After graduating from Leipzig University, she was a member of the International Research Training Group *InterArt* at the Freie Universität Berlin and a visiting scholar at Goldsmiths College in London, supported by a DFG scholarship from the German Research Foundation for her doctoral research on the gendered economies of curating. Buurman worked as an adjunct lecturer at the universities/art academies of Leipzig, Hildesheim, and Bremen, and has been involved in numerous art education, exhibition, and publication projects, such as the project *Arbeitslose als Avantgarde*, which she organized in the framework of *documenta 12*, or the *Networks of Care* program, she is currently co-curating at nGbK in Berlin. Her research and publications focus on exhibition studies, the politics, economies and epistemologies of curating, the past and present of documenta, the shifting roles of race, class and gender in artistic and curatorial practice, the transcultural conditions of cultural production in a global context as well as the political ambivalences of modernity and their uncanny hauntings today. She co-edited *documenta: Curating the History of the Present* (with Dorothee Richter, 2017), *Situating Global Art: Temporalities – Topologies – Trajectories* (with Sarah Dornhof, Birgit Hopfener and Barbara Lutz, 2018) and serves as an editor of the research platform *documenta studies*, which she co-founded with Nora Sternfeld, Carina Herring, and Ina Wudtke in October 2018.

Dear Sibila: We are Freelance Feminist Instituting from our Homes, Aren't You? Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps (SKGAL)

What does it mean [...] to curate an exhibition or run feminist art organizations that attempt to challenge and undermine dominant structures, modes of production, and forms of art and knowledge? What acts of self-exploitation may be involved? [...] How can creative dark matter¹ and knowledge be made visible without playing into cognitive capitalism's hands?²

These were some of the questions that we—as part of the curatorial team together with art educator and artist Andrea Haas and art historian and curator Véronique Boilard—raised in the exhibition booklet *DARK ENERGY. Feminist Organizing, Working Collectively* (2019); questions that were tackled by the different channels of the project: a pre-gathering, an exhibition, an accompanying programme, a workshop, and a published translation of an interview.³

In a first attempt to reflect upon the economies of art and knowledge production in relation to the project *DARK ENERGY*, we asked the participating artist Minna Henriksson to work with us on a diagram of the exhibition.⁴ While working on the final stages of the exhibition, we mapped the friendships, working relations, common interests, and institutional proceedings involved, and disclosed the exhibition's budget—how the money was distributed and spent—as well as non-monetary forms of exchange. By then, we were all too well aware that precarity is the common condition in the cultural sector, but one differentiated by class, gender, racism, among other factors. Why else would we have conceived a project focusing on creative dark matter? We knew that the labour realized for this project would never be compensated in the form of an adequately paid salary, and yet we walked the walk.

Through the diagram, we wanted to show the public the relationships that had led to the budget distribution in making the exhibition. At the same time, the diagram

was a way to address our roles as artist-curators within a system built on cultural capital and its unspoken agreement to “labours of love” within the culture and knowledge sector.⁵ It is a troublesome reminder that we almost solely worked for affective remuneration and as an “investment” in our future careers. Such a shiny carrot on a stick! Looking at the exhibition diagram now, the tension between these two forms of being “valorised but not valued”⁶ reveals itself at once: it shows how much we are invested in this exhibition with our lives; we can recognise the rudimentary contours of our own collaboration and friendship as well as its broader network of friends and working relations; our education levels, our employment, and our institutional involvement. Despite (or because) of our love and enthusiasm for building from and bolstering feminist (art) practices, one purpose of the exhibition diagram was to dis-identify from the working conditions through showing the economies behind the project, including the exhibition's budget, as the freelance curator and writer Jenny Richards proposed in the conversation with art historian Danielle Child and curator and researcher Helena Reckitt about “Labours of Love.”⁷ In this sense, the diagram also puts forward the question of how to counter the dismal effects of over-identification with our labour without withdrawing from what we are struggling for?

Since the diagram was produced on top of all the other work involved in the making of an exhibition, with no further time to critically dwell on the structure of work conditions, it has also turned into a prompt for later reflections. For this text, we have picked up this note to ourselves and taken a closer look at the diagram, to see what might become more visible, to add what we find missing, to annotate and extend in order to show the contradictions traversing *DARK ENERGY*. Here we are, a year and half after the exhibition's completion, pondering on our vocation, enthusiasm and “labours of love.” It was also the combination of these three drives

that made us apply in November 2019 to the call for papers for an anthology on “Unsettling Feminist Curating, Radical Subjectivities, Caring Alliances, and Striking Relations” and in March 2019 to rewrite the proposal that was then selected for this issue of *OnCurating*.⁸

Freelance Feminist Instituting on Enthusiasm and Unpaid Labour

Working for more than fifteen years for the most part as freelancers in the cultural and knowledge sector, we have been utterly cognizant that our labour and self-exploitation are part of “the invisible dark matter that keeps the culture sector going,”⁹ “[A]part from domestic and care work,” writes the artist Hito Steyerl in 2012, “art is the industry with the most unpaid labour around. It sustains itself on the time and energy of unpaid interns and self-exploiting actors on pretty much every level and in almost every function.”¹⁰ At the time we wrote the exhibition proposal, taking Steyerl’s consideration as a key argument, we had yet to realise that we are full-blown enthusiasts like Sibila—the main character of *El entusiasmo. Precariedad y trabajo creativo en la era digital* [Enthusiasm: Precariousness and Creative Work in the Digital Era, 2017] by the art historian and writer Remedios Zafra—and how much vocation and enthusiasm keep us going.

Sibila is a worker in the cultural and knowledge sector, she “is enthusiastic and hard-working. Her name is Cristina, María, Ana, Inés, Silvia, Laura..., even when she is Jordi or Manuel, she is always feminized”¹¹ and even more vulnerable if not white, heterosexual, able-bodied, at least middle-class and/or holding legal citizenship, among other factors. In this text, Sibila’s name is Nina and Julia, she comes from a middle-class background, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and with legal citizenship from an EU-country. We are part of the multitude that Zafra so vividly describes:

A multitude fueled by unpaid scholars, people hired by hours and interns, lone writers of great vocation, nomadic freelancers, pregnant doctoral students, collaborators and cultural critics, versatile artist-curators and permanently connected youngsters who almost always “compete.”¹²

The two of us are dear friends, collaborators as the Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps (abbreviated in German as SKGAL), and artist-researchers employed on sessional contracts at more than one

university. Like Sibila we are told: “You have an education and a roof over your head. You are *privileged*, what are you complaining about?”¹³ Zafra elaborates that this is referred to as “the precariousness of the privileged’ because when the extreme inequality of those who have nothing is normalised and made overly visible, *privilege* seems to be ‘having the basics and engaging in self-exploitation.’”¹⁴ For this text, while we write, talk, exchange thoughts, and work on the diagram, mediated by screens, several months elapse. Due to SARS-CoV-2 combined with remote teaching, we are not only permanently connected online but we also earn less and are almost non-stop in front of screens at our tables.¹⁵ Confined to our homes, we work for several institutions.

As *The Disoeuvre: An Argument in 4 Voices (WASL Table)* (2018) by the participating artist, writer, and art educator Felicity Allen distinctly shows, working from home has long been a feminist condition. The photo-essay series features a wooden table that Allen had acquired around the time she co-founded the Women Artists Slide Library (WASL) in 1978. The series conveys how the table supported the work of WASL but also served other purposes for more than forty years: it was used for painting, for a buffet at her son’s party, or for writing her PhD. Reflecting upon working conditions as an artist, Allen makes the point that “women, POCs, and other marginalized people need to work socially and institutionally outside as well as from inside the studio in order to make work and change the structures to allow them in.”¹⁶ Still today, the table is in the artist’s home while we, confined at home, keep on working to *change the structures*.

We are freelance feminist instituting from our homes. This means that we work, clean, cook, pay for the Internet, do computer maintenance as well as digital bureaucracies, talk, complain, discuss, love, laugh, and cry with the ones we share our homes with. The *triple working day*—“work outside the home, work within the home, and affective work of producing relations and networks of care”¹⁷—has now been confined to the home of billions, deepening an already existing crisis of social reproduction and exacerbating nearly every kind of discrimination.¹⁸ While this is not a new situation, during the global pandemic, it has become more widespread and therefore a more visible condition. The curator, cultural theorist, and urban researcher Elke Krasny rightly reminds us that the crisis of the pandemic

affecting the vast majority of the planet's population of course predates by far the current crisis, as it dates back to colonial capitalism, which has long infected the planet with viral forms of exploitation, exhaustion, extraction, and depletion. The current pandemic amplifies the crisis of care.¹⁹

At this present conjuncture, we add the three words, confined at home, to one of the questions that theorist and activist Verónica Gago poses in relation to the international and plurinational feminist strikes on March 8: Confined at home, "When do you stop, if after work you keep working at home and in the neighborhood, in all those community spaces that, in fact, expand and overflow the domestic sphere, and reformulate work itself?"²⁰ In relation to the subjects raised on *Instituting Feminism* in this issue, we ask if feminist instituting can redefine the very notion of work; if feminist instituting is capable of connecting to proposals of feminist economies.²¹ Confined in our homes, what does it entail to challenge institutions and/or to scope out new projects in the cultural sector while we are freelance feminist instituting?

Feminist Instituting on Open Calls

In 2016, at our respective homes, in front of our screens, together with Andrea we wrote an exhibition proposal for the open call of the Vice-Rectorate for Art and Research at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna on "Artistic Approaches to Economies of Knowledge."²² Like Sibila, we believe that a system based on public calls "is fairer than one that favors the arbitrariness of supporting acquaintances, relatives or friends. Sibila believes that and Sibila desires it."²³ In Austria, in recent years, womxn's organisations, feminist magazines, trans- and migrant-led associations have been operating under the risk of losing state funding under the pretence of an endless "budget crisis"—which would lead to even fewer opportunities to become acquainted with and explore feminist practices. Thus, it felt pertinent to propose a project to introduce diverse—historical as well as contemporary—feminist collaborative practices and how they are influenced by their general economic set-up. The subject of the call undoubtedly directly addressed our interests, and it seemed to offer plenty of resources.²⁴ All of this together made us agree to an "exhibition business practice in which budgets become smaller, work more precarious, the market more global, and the competition increasingly intense."²⁵ Like Sibila, we readily fell into the trap of knowing but not delving into how the open call itself exploited love, vocation,

and enthusiasm. Looking at the exhibition diagram now, it cannot be ignored that the business practice of the call and the labour we put into the proposal is missing. Retrospectively, this seems an important omission since the call determined a priori our working relation with the institution.

It is therefore noteworthy that in terms of the operating budget, which includes the curators' fees, the call makes no difference regarding the curators' relation to the Academy. How and if the work of the curators is remunerated depends on whether one is a full-time or a half-time employee, a sessional teacher, a student, or an independent artist or curator with no affiliation to the institution.²⁶ The biggest difference being that while external curators or curatorial teams need to fit their fees into the operational budget (in 2016, this was €7500)—which also has to cover artist fees, the production of new artworks, travel and accommodation costs, shipping, and the insurance of artworks, as well as the materials for the exhibition design—staff of the Academy are expected to do their curatorial labour as part of their employment. Due to their employment, Academy staff might find themselves in an economically more stable situation; most likely, though, parts of their labour are also rendered as labours of love. In both working relations, the academic institution either seems oblivious of the labour the curators have to put into the making of an exhibition at best, or it exploits the promise of the open call for its own benefits at worst. In this sense, the problems we know from working at home—e.g., how the difference between work and non-work is blurred, or how work never gets done—can also be found in how the work outside the home has expanded into the academic system. "The academic system would implode," Reckitt points out in "Labours of Love," "if we demanded payment for the actual hours that we put in."²⁷

Freelance Feminist Instituting

DARK ENERGY took place at xhibit, the exhibition space of the Academy. With large windows opening onto the street and on approximately 280 m² on two floors, xhibit embarked on a mission to provide more visibility to exhibitions "at the interface between academic teaching, artistic-scholarly research and the international field of art."²⁸ Until then, xhibit had been less noticeable to the public eye on the second floor of the Academy's main building. The orientation of its new visibility is clear: the space is within walking distance of five renowned contemporary art galleries. Since 1999, these galleries had formed, as one of them advertises, a

“new centre of contemporary art and discussion [...], at close quarters to Wiener Secession, Academy of Fine Arts, Kunsthistorisches Museum and Museumsquartier.”²⁹

The renovation for the new space took longer than expected. As the opening of exhibit at its new location was postponed several times, so was the opening of *DARK ENERGY*. As a result, we worked sporadically on the project over a period of two years. This did not convert into higher fees but provided us with more time for grant writing. Hence, we were able to cover the travel and accommodation costs for three artists and theorists who joined us for a pre-gathering, as well as for three artists and Véronique, from our curatorial team, to install their works in person and be present at the opening. Without a doubt, being able to spend time and be in the same space together in Vienna—to share thoughts about our practices and discuss what motivates us—enabled those moments when we felt our work had *paid off*. These moments were a substantial part of our affective remuneration for all our self-exploitation. If only we could do that on different terms.

DARK ENERGY was finally inaugurated in March 2019. The whole project would not have been possible without the work and research we had done so enthusiastically, the experiences we had gained, and the practice we had accrued over five years as part of the Austrian Association of Women Artists (abbreviated in German as VBKÖ: Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs)—a womxn artist-run space with a long and complex history. When other artists' associations such as the Vienna Secession denied women artists membership, and the Academy of Fine Arts did not allow women to enrol at the beginning of the 20th century, the VBKÖ campaigned for women's admission into these all-men institutions.³⁰ Still today, the VBKÖ's annual state subsidy of around €25,000 is approximately twenty times less than the one of Vienna Secession.³¹ Thus, its annual programme of exhibition and events is primarily supported by the enthusiasm and voluntary work of its members. From 2012 to 2017, we too carried out volunteer institutional work and experiments to develop a more permeable approach to curating. The method was to collectively create space in the institution for feminist queer antiracist and decolonising discourses through multiple avenues of entry such as group exhibitions, artists' talks, panels, tours, an annual ball, workshops, symposia, and a German language course for newly arrived citizens. Alongside our institutional work at the VBKÖ, as SKGAL we researched the unsettling history of the association and dug into the

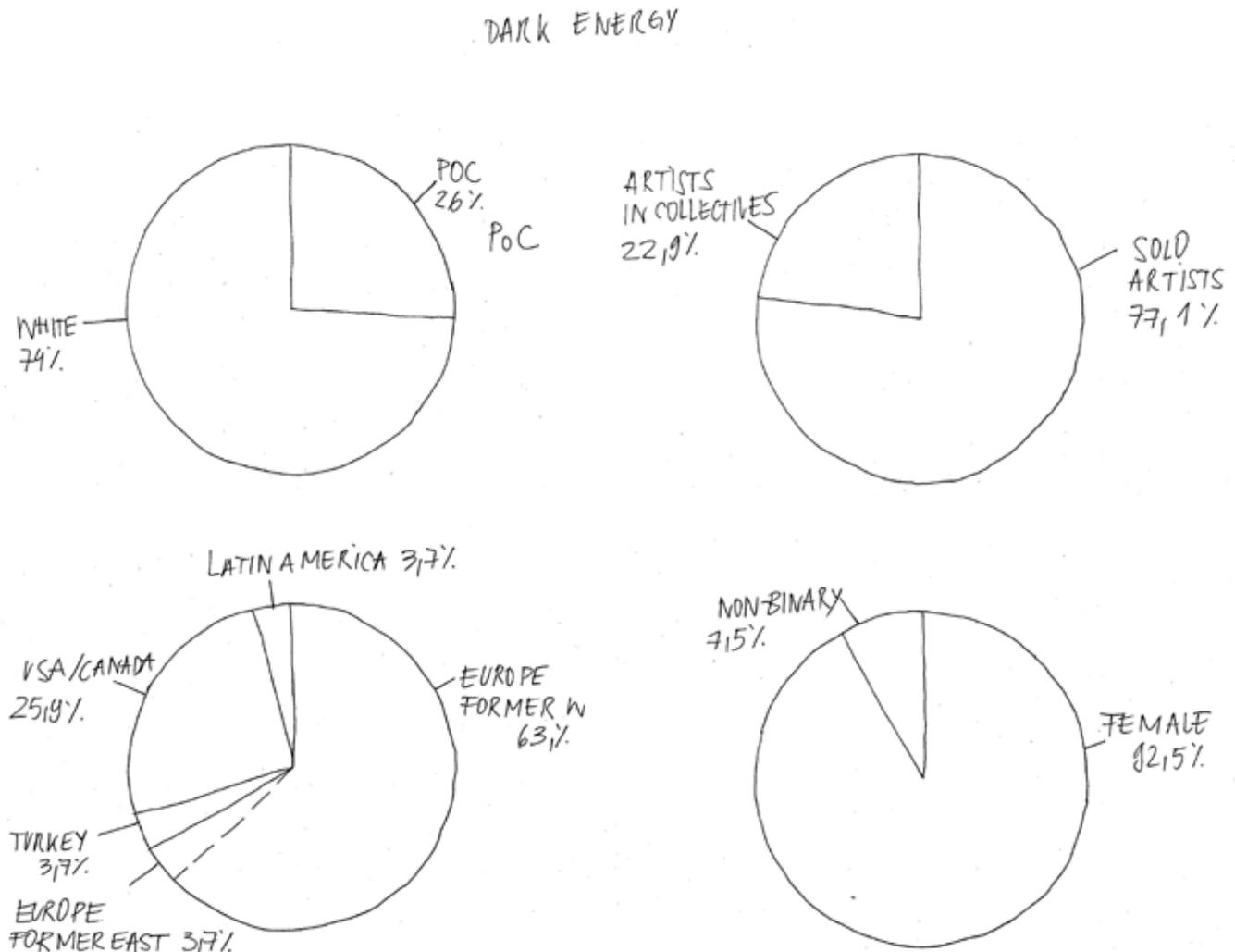
archives of other feminist art institutions, such as the *Women's Art Library* (WAL), the *Women of Colour Index* (WOCI) in London, and the practices of the Casco Art Institute³² in Utrecht, all of which later featured in *DARK ENERGY* as examples from which to learn and unlearn.

Let's take a closer look at the WOCI, created more than thirty years ago. In 1987, the UK-based African-American multi-media artist and archivist Rita Keegan—a key figure in the British Black Arts Movement—joined the Women's Art Library (WAL) to establish the Black Women Artists Index, later called Women of Colour Index. In an interview, Keegan told the participating Black artist, designer, and archivist Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski that she got paid for creating this Index at the end of the 1980s:

I got paid, you know I survived on it, it wasn't a massive amount of money, but it was a job. Though you know, I would have done it with or without the job, but getting paid was gravy. It was, you know, it was originally two days a week at minimum wage, but it was 2 days a week on minimum wage. [laughs]³³

Keegan's words convey her enthusiasm for documenting as much as her relief at regular pay. After Keegan left, the WOCI “laid dormant” for more than twenty years until the arts, archives, and research group X Marks the Spot (Lauren Craig, Mystique Holloway, Zhi Holloway, Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski) provided a novel access point to the Index through their publication *Human Endeavour: A Creative Finding Aid for the Women of Colour Index* in 2015.³⁴

Although WAL and WOCI are part of the Special Collections at Goldsmiths, University of London, it is readily apparent that, in the current precarious era, ongoing work with and activation of WOCI are unfeasible. As there is a lack of staff who could solely focus on the WOCI, to update and activate it, and not enough budget to invite artists/curators/researchers to work with it consistently, the WOCI and the Human Endeavour, although the latter is permanently accessible online, lie almost dormant as a commentary on the WAL collection. Exploitation and sacrifice are visibly increasing in contexts related to culture and knowledge—including those of WAL and *DARK ENERGY*. “The sacrifices that artists have historically made in their devotion to their art,” Helena Reckitt points out, “are now expected of everyone who works in the cultural sector.”³⁵



SKGAL, *Dark Energy Pie Charts Diagram*, 2021

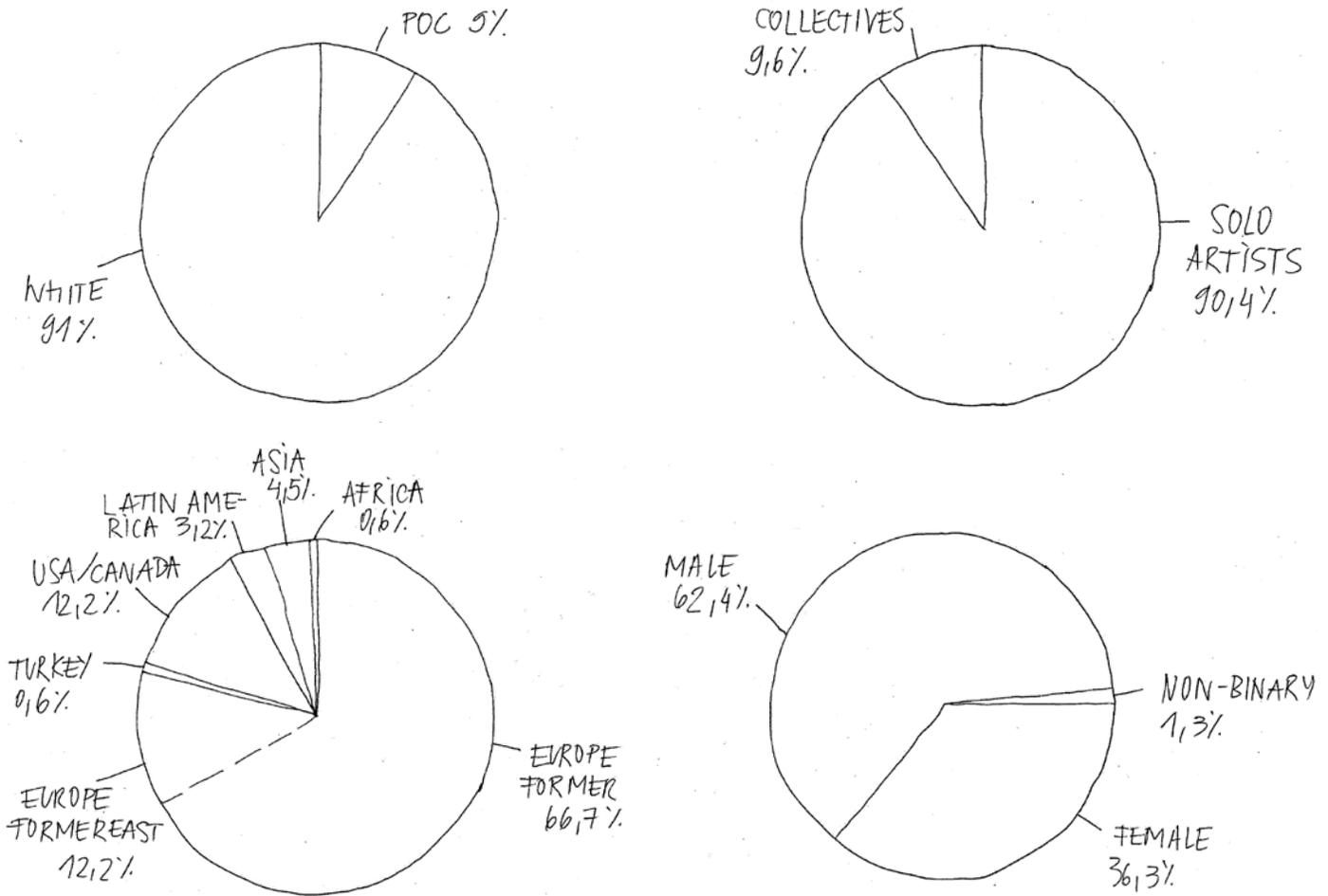
Considering our experience of working for the VBKÖ, and from what we learned from other feminist art organisations, it becomes apparent that the exhibition diagram is truly a diagram of creative dark matter. In this diagram, like the VBKÖ, many of the feminist organisations and archives rely on underpaid or volunteer work by artists, activists, and other enthusiasts of our own generation as well as the generations before us—the creative dark matter nurtured the exhibition, while its dark energy holds the potential to expand fixed ideas about artistic creation and to question exploitative modes of production and working conditions. Looking at this web of creative dark matter and dark energy now in relation to the pie chart of the exhibition's budget, we see that the labour of love of the web is not reflected in the pie chart of how the budget was distributed. Bringing feminist (art) practices of dark energy into the exhibition space of the Academy of Fine Arts—with its

orientation towards an international business of artistic-scholarly research, if not the art market—inevitably creates friction as its different economies collide. Reflecting today, it seems important to pay attention to such transitions between divergent economic and organisational contexts. After all, it makes a difference if one works for very little money for a state-funded public institution or an underfunded self-organized feminist art organization.

Feminist Instituting in the Digital Era

The feminist art institutions and practices featured in *DARK ENERGY* have faced dynamics of discrimination and exclusion which are still or yet again active, although we are in a different era. It is a digital one. As Zafra shows in *El entusiasmo*, in our current digital era, the ways cultural workers' vocation and enthusiasm are exploited has to be understood in the context of

GALLERIES



SKGAL, *Galleries Eschenbachgasse Pie Charts Diagram 2020* (Crone Wien, Martin Janda, Meyer Kainer, Kroboth, Steinek), 2021

today's infinite digital activities which are predominantly embraced as pleasurable.³⁶ "While our creative life is committed (and in it I as a brand) to today's *online* activity, scrutinised twenty-four hours a day,"³⁷ the leisure- and desire-driven, mostly unpaid activities of social media users, like Sibila, contribute as unremunerated forms of work, activities, and connections that profit a few Internet companies.³⁸ At this present conjuncture, the global pandemic has accelerated the cultural and knowledge sector's turn to the digital arena. In the world of culture, this has meant podcasts, art blogs, live streaming, Internet exhibitions, virtual show days/walkabouts and studio tours, among others. In a time when the audience needs to stay home, these are means chosen by cultural organisations to engage their public in order to maintain their role as a resource for cultural production and consumption.³⁹ But this is just one part of the picture. For the most part, online

content, such as live-streaming and virtual touring, is (still) accessible (for free). However, access to smartphones and the cost of data as well as the great pollution caused by Internet data transmission need to be considered before providing URL links or big file attachments as an all-encompassing solution for engaging diverse audiences across the socioeconomic divide. These pressing considerations need to be taken into account while (freelance) feminist instituting (from home), connected 24/7 to the Internet!

Freeing Up Time and Energy: Let's Imagine!

It was a mix of vocation, love, and enthusiasm that drove our *versatile artist-curator* work and fuelled the productive machine of *DARK ENERGY*. Through all of it ran the exploitation of selves and "the impossibility to see where our work begins and ends, where our work ends and our desires begin."⁴⁰ Clearly, it is a bad habit of



Installation views, *DARK ENERGY*, with works by Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Aida Wilde, ff. Feministisches Fundbüro, Martha Fleming and Lyne Lapointe, Felicity Allen, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, Anti*Colonial Fantasies – Imayna Caceres, Sunanda Mesquita, Sophie Utikal, Felicity Allen and Althea Greenan, filmprogramm by Anne Golden with Chantal DuPont, Vera Frenkel, Tanya Mars, Diane Poitras, Martha Rosler, Vidéographe; Joyce Wieland, exhibit, Vienna 2019. Photo: Lisa Rastl.

all the enthusiasts like us! “Not distinguishing between work and life” is one of the almost twenty bad habits that Child, Reckitt, and Richards identified we collectively share.⁴¹ In the course of working two years on and off on *DARK ENERGY*, each of us earned all in all €400. There is no doubt that we are full-blown enthusiasts!⁴²

Sibila is the name which Zafra gave to all these enthusiasts. It is important to remember that Sibila's life belongs to hundreds and hundreds of womxn, students, colleagues, and strangers. “After the enthusiasm comes exhaustion and perhaps disorientation,” describes Zafra but, it seems to her, “that ‘consciousness’, ‘solidarity’, and ‘imagination’ can be great allies for them (us).”⁴³ Indeed they are great allies for us. Let's imagine what to do for the coming feminist strike on March 8! As Gago points out, there is a “double dynamic to the strike: to stop certain activities, to *free up time and energy* in order to give time and space to others (both existing ones and those to come).”⁴⁴

In this respect, we want to direct the energy we put into this text—the labour of love enthusiastically writing such a feminist killjoy text as well as the unpaid work hours and worked-through weekends—away from expanding our curriculum back to our web of creative dark matter and dark energy. We imagine freeing up time and energy, and calling our friends and colleagues to collectively explore “Can We Imagine a Feminist Economy of Culture?”⁴⁵ First, we would collect our experiences of feminist instituting from inside and outside the institutions, and we would discuss, for example, the economies of open calls in the culture and knowledge sector. Later, we would delve into the possibilities for art and knowledge workers to (completely) unlink from current economies, to build alternatives, parallel infrastructures that sustain themselves outside the capitalist system, meeting the urgent demand of planetary ecological justice.



Installation views, *DARK ENERGY*, with work by Annette Krauss and the shifting team at the Casco Art Institute, and with archival materials from La Centrale galerie Powerhouse with works by lamathilde, Anne-Marie Proulx; Minna Henriksson, Althea Greenan, exhibit, Vienna 2019. Photo: Lisa Rastl.

In an attempt to connect to proposals of feminist economies in our freelance feminist instituting, we ask: Can we come up with agreements of cultural production—such as an open call—“based on the principles [...] of social and local economies”?⁴⁶ Can we imagine what exhibitions at state-subsidised institutions, and even private ones, would look like if they had commons-based models of cultural production?⁴⁷ Can we think of ways to organise cooperative forms of cultural production and consumption? How can we challenge the unsustainable cultural production and consumption to realise planetary environmental justice for humans and nonhumans alike?

Looking at the exhibition diagram now, we see there are more things which are not addressed. We realise that the tonnes of carbon footprint produced, as well as the work of external staff, are missing. We did not make time to consider ecological dark matter as inextricable from artistic, social, political, and economic forces. Nor did we think about how our labour as external curators

relates to the work of the external cleaning staff or the external workers of the security firm. How can we enable sustainable practices? How can we build alliances with other groups affected by precarity? How can we spark solidarity and reach other bodies in struggle outside the cultural sector to share common contradictions? How can we make ecological commitments “in order to take the best care of our broken and infected planet”?⁴⁸

Collectively making diagrams might enable us to more clearly address unsustainable working conditions and ecologies in the cultural sector. It might also allow us to engage more effectively in the contradictions at the heart of (freelance) feminist instituting and to convert them into purposeful referents and creative power rather than obstacles. Sibila out there—at home, in the institution—strike and imagine on March 8! Let's create affective structures through which hope, fear, anxiety, desire, as well as common struggles and as such possibilities for change are constituted. Here's to a big desire of freelance feminist instituting!

Notes

1 Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2011).

2 Véronique Boilard, Andrea Haas, Nina Höchtl, Julia Wieger, "Introduction," in *DARK ENERGY. Feminist Organizing, Working Collectively* (exhibition booklet, Vienna: Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2019), 11. See: <https://tinyurl.com/yxu8mqrj>

3 After the opening, Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski and Aide Wilde, with the funding and support of *The Academy Goes to School (Agids)* programme, convened a printing workshop with high school students with histories of migration. The high school students' posters were presented in *DARK ENERGY* as part of Ahaiwe Sowinski and Wilde's installation.

For the translation of the interview, see: Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski, Rita Keegan, "Nachdenken mit Rita Keegan, der Erfinderin des Women of Colour Index (WOCI)," in *DERDIEDAS bildende, WA(Ä)HL[EN] 7*(2019). For more on the pre-gathering, see: <https://tinyurl.com/y6qb2k8r>; on the book launch and guided tours, see: <https://tinyurl.com/yxrluhgl>; and on the screening, see: <https://tinyurl.com/y2ocqktj>.

4 We would like to thank Minna for working with us on the diagram within her artist fee of €300. This artist fee had been allocated from the operating budget to all the participating artists. Minna's travel, accommodation, and production costs of €1000 were covered by the Frame Fund of Finland.

5 Danielle Child, Helena Reckitt, Jenny Richards, "Labours of Love," *Third Text* 31:1 (2017): 147-168.

6 Emma Dowling, "Valorised but Not Valued? Affective Remuneration, Social Reproduction and Feminist Politics beyond the Recovery," *British Politics* 11, no. 4 (December 2016): 452-468.

7 Child, "Labours of Love," 162.

8 CFP: Unsettling Feminist Curating, in: ArtHist.net, September 29, 2019, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://arthist.net/archive/21679>.

9 Hito Steyerl, "The Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy," *The Wretched of the Screen* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2012), 96. In London, the Carrot Workers' Collective and the Precarious Workers Brigade organise around the conditions of free labour in contemporary economies, in particular the cultural sector. See: <https://carrotworkers.wordpress.com/>, <https://precariousworkersbrigade.tumblr.com/>.

10 Steyerl, "The Politics of Art," 96.

11 Remedios Zafra, *El entusiasmo. Precariedad y trabajo creativo en la era digital* (Barcelona: Anagrama, 2017), 41.

12 Ibid., 21.

13 Remedios Zafra, "The Precariousness of the Privileged," *Barcelona Metropolis* 113, "Emerging Vulnerabilities" Issue (November 2019), accessed November 5, 2020, <https://www.barcelona.cat/metropolis/en/contents/the-precariousness-the-privileged>.

14 Ibid.

15 In 2020 in Austria, self-employed artists could apply for a one-time state subsidy of up to €10,000 to cover COVID-19 related losses of income.

16 Allen in *DARK ENERGY*, 27.

17 Véronica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (London: Verso, 2020), 27.

18 It goes beyond the scope of this text, but it is important to add that seeking refuge from the danger of the virus means being confined to a situation no less dangerous for some womxn: a situation of domestic violence and abuse. Further, care work is overwhelmingly relegated to womxn, and working-class womxn, and especially womxn of color and/or with a history of migration, are not only more at risk of contracting COVID-19 and dying from it, they are also over-represented in essential care work roles including nursing, elderly care, childcare, food service, and domestic labour. In Austria, the *Verein Autonomer Österreichischer Frauenhäuser* (Association of Autonomous Austrian Shelters for Women), which provides a domestic violence helpline for women, has noticed an increase in violence against women and children since the outbreak of the Corona crisis. In July 2020, they stated that they "usually receive 22 calls per day, currently there are up to 36 calls per day, and this figure is rising." Elisabeth Buder, "Gewalt gegen Frauen und Mädchen während Covid-19," *UN Women Austria*, accessed February 21, 2021, <https://www.unwomen.at/2020/07/08/gewalt-gegen-frauen-und-maedchen-waehrend-covid-19/>.

19 Elke Krasny, "Radicalizing Care: Living with a Broken and Infected Planet," in *Provisions: Observing and Archiving COVID-19, Site Magazine* (2020), accessed January 8, 2021, <https://www.thesitemagazine.com/elke-krasny>.

20 Gago, *Feminist International*, 27.

21 Regarding feminist economies, we are specifically thinking of proposals, practices, and theories conceived by the DAWN School of Feminist Economics. See: <https://dawnnet.org/movement-building/social-mobilization/the-school-of-feminist-economics-sfe/>, <https://www.economiafeministadawn.org/>.

22 Exhibit, the exhibition space of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, was founded in 2010, and its programme consists of three exhibition formats: the graduation

show, the solo show for a graduate selected by a jury, and the curated exhibition for which the Academy publishes a yearly call. The call is addressed to staff and students of the Academy, as well as to artists and curators outside the institution. Over the last ten years, though, in most of the selected curatorial teams, at least one member was affiliated with the Academy. For more on the 2016 call, see: https://www.akbild.ac.at/portal_en/research/art-research-service/ausschreibungen-wettbewerbe_en/2017/xhibit-call-for-exhibition-proposals-fuer-das-studienjahr-2017-2018/Call_xhibit_e_2017_18.pdf.

23 Zafra, *El entusiasmo*, 68.

24 In Vienna, there are currently only a few art institutions, all of them independent, that put out open calls for exhibitions: the Kunsthalle Exnergasse (<https://www.wuk.at/kunsthalle-exnergasse/>), the IG Bildende Kunst (<https://igbildendekunst.at/en/home/>), and recently the VBKÖ (<https://www.vbkoe.org/>) and Haus (<https://haus.wien/>), all of which provide a smaller operating budget than the Academy.

25 Vera Lauf and Barbara Mahlknecht, "A PROPOSAL TO CALL," exhibition text, Kunsthalle Exnergasse (Vienna, 2015), accessed January 9, 2021, <https://www.wuk.at/en/kunsthalle-exnergasse/kunsthalle-exnergasse-archive/2015/11/a-proposal-to-call/>.

26 When we handed in our proposal, two members of our curatorial team came from inside the Academy and two from the outside. At that moment, Julia was employed part-time, and Andrea was starting her PhD, while Nina and Véronique had no affiliation with the Academy. At a later stage, still before the opening, Andrea had paused her PhD studies, and Julia's contract had run out.

27 Reckitt, "Labours of Love," 149.

28 xhibit statement, accessed November 24, 2020, https://www.akbild.ac.at/portal_en/art-exhibiting/exhibition-space-of-the-academy/xhibit.

29 Galerie Martin Janda, overview text, Basel 2019, accessed November 24, 2020, <https://www.artbasel.com/catalog/gallery/1542/Galerie-Martin-Janda>.

30 Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs Archiv/Archive of the Austrian Association of Women Artists, VBKÖ ARCH 32. For more on the campaigns of the VBKÖ, see Megan Brandow-Faller, "An Art of Their Own. Reinventing Frauenkunst in the Female Academies and Artist Leagues of Late Imperial and First Republic Austria, 1900–1930" (PhD dissertation, Georgetown University, 2010), 51–273.

31 Nina Höchtl and Julia Wieger, "'Die Kunst der Frau', interview by Fiona Sara Schmidt, *an.schläge* 6 (2016), accessed November 15, 2020, <https://anschlaege.at/die-kunst-der-frau/>.

32 Binna Choi and Yolande van der Heide, "Decolonizing Art Institutes," *Notes on Curating* 35 (December 2017): 87–98, accessed November 28, 2020, <https://on-curating.org/issue-35-reader/decolonizing-art-institutes-from-a-labor-point-of-view.html>.

33 Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski, "Reflecting with Rita Keegan—on 4 September 2015," in *Human Endeavour: A Creative Finding Aid for the Women of Colour Index*, eds. X Marks the Spot, Joan Anim-Addo, Althea Greenan (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2015) accessed November 28, 2020, <http://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/19685/>.

34 Catherine Grant and Althea Greenan, "Lost and Found: Feminism, Archives and the University under Lockdown," *Goldsmiths Press* (2020), accessed December 11, 2020, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press/features/lost-and-found/>.

35 Reckitt, "Labours of Love," 149.

36 Zafra, *El entusiasmo*.

37 Zafra, "The Precariousness of the Privileged."

38 It goes beyond the scope of this text, but it is important to point out that in this digital era, the corporate power of a few US and Chinese digital companies is on the cusp of achieving "quantum supremacy" from "network-data"—the accumulation of data-as-capital that makes up capitalism's digital age. See: Anita Gurusurthy y Nandini Chami, "The Intelligent Corporation. Data and the Digital Economy," *State of Power 2020*, January 16, 2020, accessed December 11, 2020, <https://longreads.tni.org/stateofpower/the-intelligent-corporation-data-and-the-digital-economy>.

39 In Vienna, major state cultural institutions, from the Belvedere to the State Opera, have put almost all of the city's cultural treasures online, currently offering selections from its archive of artworks and video performances, as well as a VR/360-degree experience. See: <https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/belvedere>, <https://yourstage.wien.info/en-us/article/staatsoper>. Until January 2021, galleries could apply to the Federal Ministry for a Digitizing Grant of max. €5000 for realising projects until the end of March 2021. It is very unlikely that the online presence of the Belvedere or the State Opera was realised with this amount of money. See <https://www.diegalerien.at/index.php/foerderankuendigung-2>.

40 Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Brooklyn: PM Press, 2012), 20.

41 Child et al., "Labours of Love," 156.

42 We would like to thank Stephanie Damianitsch, who worked with us as the Academy's exhibition manager, for her dedication, good spirits, and positive energy!

Without her commitment, *DARK ENERGY* could not have been realized!

43 Zafra, *El entusiasmo*, 243.

44 Gago, *Feminist International*, 25.

45 Javier Rodrigo, "¿Es posible una economía feminista de la cultura?," *Nativa*, November 9, 2015, accessed December 7, 2020, <https://nativa.cat/2014/11/es-posible-una-economia-feminista-de-la-cultura/>.

For the German translation "Können wir uns eine feministische Ökonomie der Kultur vorstellen?," see pages 85-88: http://diekamion.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/kamion_01_aus-den-kreislaeufendes-rassismus.pdf.

46 Rodrigo, "¿Es posible una economía feminista de la cultura?"

47 On the question of commons-based models of cultural production, see the inspiring work of the Casco Art Institute: Working for the Commons and its long-term engagement of cultivating and sustaining commons through art. See: <https://casco.art/en/about>.

48 Krasny, "Radicalizing Care."

**Sekretariat für Geister, Archivpolitiken und Lücken / Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps (SKGAL)
(Nina Hoechtl / Julia Wieger)**

Through artistic means, the SKGAL deals with archival politics and historiography, particularly embedding feminist and decolonising perspectives.

In lecture performances, workshops, texts, videos, exhibitions, and programmes, SKGAL grapples with materials, documents, and archives in order to set up a continual, multi-perspective, and collective historical work. Thereby, they weave together different times (from the K.u.K Monarchy to Austro-fascism to the 2nd Republic and the neoliberal present), materials, and art practices. SKGAL's feature film *Hauntings in the Archive!* (2017) on the archive and the her/history/ies of the more than 100-year-old Austrian Association of Women Artists (Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs, VBKÖ) won the Women's Voices Now Best Documentary Feature in 2018.

In 2019, *DARK ENERGY. Feminist Organizing, Working Collectively* explored feminist forms of organisation and knowledge production in the cultural sector. It gave centre stage to the visual, material, and performative characteristics of feminist collaborative practices. It asked how these forms of organisation and production are influenced by their

general economic set-up, and what begins to sway politically in this context. Which forms of creative dark matter and knowledge can be practised, produced, and disseminated when, where, and how?

At exhibit, the exhibition brought together a diverse range of efforts that tackle these questions in different contexts and times. Through the work of the participating artists, archivists, designers, and activists, the exhibition provided insights from feminist, queer, and decolonising perspectives into the forces that collide with(in) art institutions and organisations.

Curators: Véronique Boilard, Andrea Haas, Nina Höchtl, Julia Wieger

Participants: Felicity Allen; Anti*Colonial Fantasies – Imayna Caceres, Sunanda Mesquita, Sophie Utikal; Chantal DuPont; ff. Feministisches Fundbüro; Martha Fleming und Lyne Lapointe; Vera Frenkel; Anne Golden; Althea Greenan; Minna Henriksson; Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński; Annette Krauss and the shifting team at the Casco Art Institute; lamathilde; Tanya Mars; Diane Poitras; Anne-Marie Proulx; Martha Rosler; Ego Ahaiwe Sowinski; Sekretariat für Geister, Archivpolitiken und Lücken; Vidéographe; Joyce Wieland; Aida Wilde.

www.skgal.org

Spoiler Alert: Instituting Feminism Will Not Work Without a Fight

Dorothee Richter

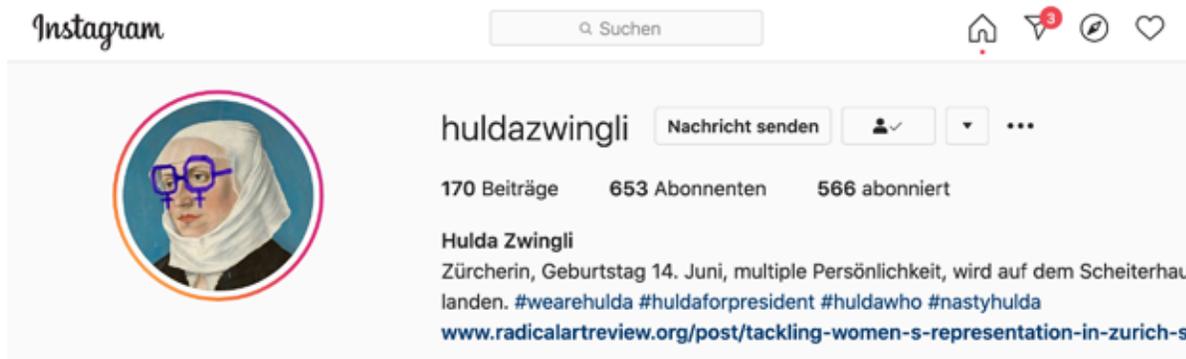


Protest march from Kunsthaus to Rathausbrücke, Zurich, with an exhibition at OnCurating Project Space, June 2021, asking for "Reclaim cultural surplus", more women in arts and diversity.

Spoiler alert: Instituting Feminism will not work without a fight, without a struggle spanning years. Even the basics required for a feminist institution in major museums have in no way been implemented. With basics, I mean diversity, an equal representation of female/male artists, and an adequate representation of artists of colour and migrant backgrounds. It is surprising how little has changed in many institutions in Europe.

The new director of the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Johan Hartle, recently proposed: "Art is unavoidably institutional, and its ontological status is contingent on the institutional condition."¹ What he is referring to in this proposition are the different approaches to art as an institution since the '60s; thus in 1964, Arthur C. Danto poses the question: what makes an object a work of art? To answer this question, he creates the term "artworld" to signify a special social sphere. He defined the artworld as a "loose network of people" who enter into a "discourse of reasons" that confers the status of art to things. In Danto's view, a work of art as such only gains access to the artworld through an art-theoretical interpretation; for him, art is a thing whose existence depends on theories. An object is granted the status of "work of art" when it embodies meaning as a symbolic form of expression. In contrast to George Dickie,² who is often mentioned as the founder of the institutional theory of art, Danto emphatically emphasises that it is only the "institutionalized discourse of reasons" and not an "empowering elite" as understood by Dickie that gives an object art status. But, of course, here might be the critical moment: who is allowed to define and under which circumstances what is understood as art? This is a battleground.

Just to give one example from my own context in Zurich:



On Instagram, an *Anonyma* (anonymous woman), “Hulda Zwingli,” shares information and thoughts about the major museum in Zurich:

Hulda is in the mood for vulgar expletives. She reads in the @tagesanzeiger the announcement of the highlights of the semi-private Kunsthaus Zürich for the opening year of the new building, where three private collections are under contract for twenty years, where the works of female artists* can be counted on one hand. @swissinfo.ch had raised figures which show a very one-sided situation, and the Tagesanzeiger also discussed the strong gender imbalance in a broad debate in which Pipilotti Rist and @tobler_andreas spoke out in favour of a quota. The new programme therefore seems like a slap in the face, with millions in public money flowing into the building. Are the most expensive institutions also the most interesting, or is this all about potency? In that case, one could just as well drive up in cars with big exhaust pipes or luxury yachts. The informed Zurich public has already seen enough of Richter and Klimt in other museums around the world. And Hodler,³ who denied women* the ability to make art, is our national artist, according to the Kunsthau. Hulda doesn't have to pay homage to that either, since there are already enough of his works and a few Baselitzes hanging around the building. This would bring us to the collection, where, with about 95% of the art by men, there would be a great need to catch up. But trophy hunters are obviously not interested in that. Hulda would like to know what our city president says about this at the board meetings. (swissinfo: 2008-2018, 15% female artists in solo exhibitions, Pipilotti Rist was the last in 2016, there were none in 2019, and one will be shown in 2020. Many of the artists exhibited so far are alive and kicking, so no cave painters).⁴

Hulda calls the well-known Kunsthau semi-private because it is actually a museum run by an association, with an enormous public budget, which will now additionally include three large collections, and a large amount of the artefacts are already owned privately.

When we speak about instituting, we ask: what does an “institution” of art mean? The critical investigation of art as institution has not only occurred through artworks, as suggested by Peter Buerger in 1974 in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*⁵ —in his view, through Dadaism and Surrealism—but also on the level of a theoretical understanding. As John Searle asks, “What is the ontology, the mode of existence, of institutional

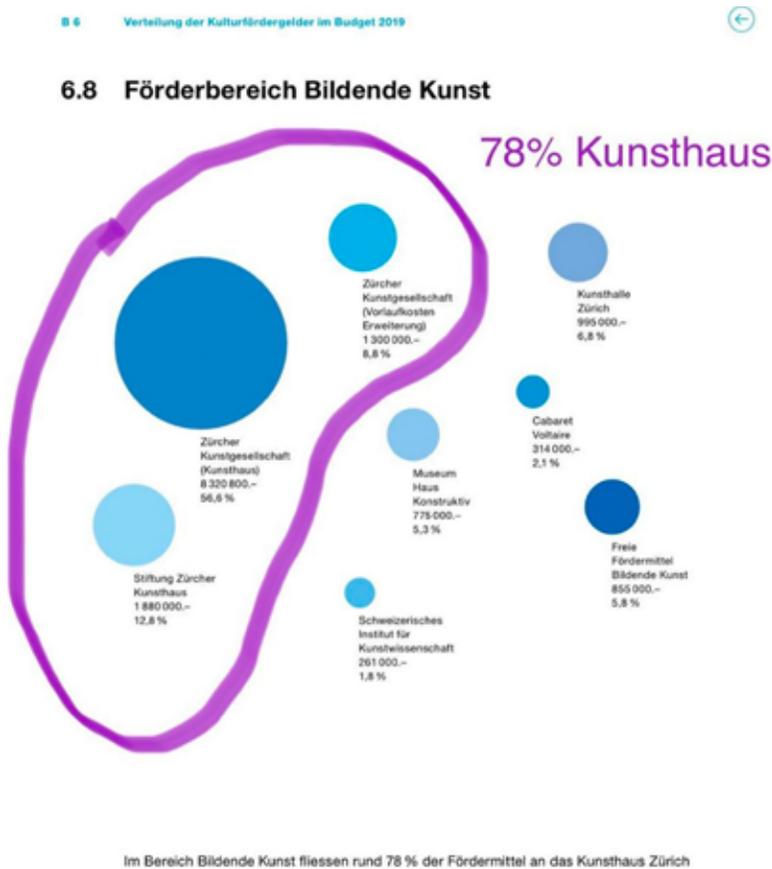
reality?”⁶ For Peter Buerger, the institution of art is characterised foremost by its relation to society, and in his view art has the status of autonomy—it is not dedicated to any direct usage and is therefore also of no consequence. Any political impetus would be falling into a void. This quasi-autonomous status (quasi insofar as there are manifold dependencies and categories which make something into art or not) also helps to whitewash shady money or the reputation of a person or company. The many protests against oil companies such as BP acting as sponsors have shown that.

Hulda Zwingli—who might represent a collective—has a lot more to say about how money and power are distributed in the Zurich art scene, in which rich collectors play a major role. This is an issue for instituting feminism insofar as most private collections will follow completely different rules in assembling artworks than a board of curators or a state-funded museum would. First of all, private collections are based on the taste of a single layperson; they are also a financial investment and should at best also generate money. Here, of course, the connection between private collections and their presentation in museums and art institutions is key.⁷ Many private collections are dominated by traditional art genres, such as painting and sculpture, and—surprise, surprise—male artists. In contrast, in public collections other criteria influence collecting activity; for example, politically relevant art can be a criterion, or complicated, installation art, or also art that complements the collection holdings in a certain aspect (for example, to balance the historical neglect of female positions). There are many reasons why a collector’s museum is *per se* a problematic construction: a huge amount of public money is used to maintain a private property; the presentation of its works in a supposedly public museum or art institution will add value to the collection, which will increase with the presentation in a supposedly public museum; and the museum is basically also very dependent on the good will of the collector. For example, a collector’s museum was founded in Bremen because this northern German city carries significant debt, so a collector’s museum seemed like an acceptable solution, which, incidentally, has proved very problematic on a number of occasions, exactly because of the abovementioned reasons.

In Zurich, we have the unusual situation that this extremely wealthy city is reorganising its largest museum more and more into a collector’s museum: three new collections will be hosted, maintained, and displayed in a new part of the building—and if this as such is not enough, the public funding for visual arts is allocating 80% of its budget to this arrangement every year. Thanks to Hulda, we can also understand how cleverly the budget is distributed among subcontractors under the umbrella of the Kunsthau.

It sounds extremely odd and problematic when, in turn, the board of the Kunsthau publicly negotiates with right-wing politicians about possible exhibitions, as has been published quite unconcernedly; see the conversation between board member Walter B. Kielholz and Mr. Blocher from the SVP (a populist right wing party).⁸ The usual tasks of a museum are clearly ignored here, as if money is allowed to do everything, inside and outside a public institution; or should one ask more basically, why is an increasingly private museum financed by public funds at all? In my view, public funding should only be given if the most rudimentary diversity requirements for gender and diversity are met—on all levels of the institution. To comment on this with another post by Hulda:

Swelling fine language⁹ repeatedly distracts Hulda's gaze from the reality of the figures. Today, the outdoor space at the semi-private Kunsthaus Zürich, which receives about 80% of the City of Zurich's budget for art, serves as an illustration. Seven works of art by men exist or are planned for this space, not counting the works by the art prize winner Nägeli. As a big sensation, one work by Pipilotti Rist was installed in 2021; so, according to the calculation, it makes a new 12.5%. 'But now a woman's work has just been installed!' Hulda can no longer hear. A work by Kader Attia has just been installed on the square, soon to be followed by a Henry Moore in the new Art Garden, and soon also a work by Olafur Eliasson in the passage, in addition to the existing monument for Ignaz Heim and the works by Auguste Rodin and Marino Marini in front of the old building. Isn't there also a tile wall by Joan Miró in the little garden? And isn't there also something in the bushes at the back of the old building? Please give us some clues! Yes, Hulda knows, Heim and half of Pipilotti Rist's work do not fall within the competence of the 100% male management of the institution, which printed a slogan for women* to endure the historical conditions in the members' magazine, but within that of the KiöR (oops «Kunst und Bau»), which is somehow also the city. And the city has a president who has been sitting on the board of the institution for years. Hulda reads homepages, member magazines and slogans in social media carefully, for example, that women can 'get a dose of women's power on International Women's Day at the Kunsthaus.' Long live the city of Zurich with its equality plan!¹⁰



What is most astonishing under the circumstances is that the largest political party governing Zurich, the SP (a mildly left-wing bourgeois party), which is also the party that nominated the mayor, Corinne Mauch, has gender equality as one of the major goals in their party programme: “The legal and actual equality of all genders is one of the most important concerns of the SP. The party is committed at all levels to self-determination, equal opportunities and against discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity.”¹¹ Maybe this lofty statement should be applied to how the actual departments implement their policies?

There are many rumours about one collection specifically, the Bührle collection. Obviously, this has motivated the mayor, together with the director of the cultural department of Zurich, to commission the University of Zurich to research this topic. Thus, a research group around Prof. Dr. Matthieu Leimgruber started a research project on the arms industry, capital, and the Kunsthaus. The result was a publication¹² based on a three-year research project by the University of Zurich. Nearly on the same day of its publication, the director of the cultural department handed in his resignation. The outcome of the research shows the problematic background of the collection. Here is the summary from the *Sueddeutsche Zeitung* newspaper:

When the 206-million-franc Chipperfield extension opens in autumn, the Kunsthaus Zürich hopes that it will finally catapult the museum into the premier league. The visitor magnets in the new exhibition halls will be the showpieces of the “Bührle Collection”: Monet, van Gogh, Renoir, Picasso, Cézanne, Modigliani and more. But the 200 or so works of art in the Bührle permanent loan seem overshadowed by the past. There is talk of a “contaminated museum”. The collection brings a dark history of persecution, forced labour, forced sales, expropriation and war profiteering onto the museum stage.

The unease is ignited by the biography of the collector and the history of the collection. For Emil Georg Bührle (1890-1956) was not a harmless, art-obsessed cultural citizen who invested almost ten million francs in the Kunsthaus Zürich as early as the post-war period. The University of Zurich (UZH) recently published a historical study entitled *Kriegsgeschäfte, Kapital und Kunsthaus. The Emil Bührle Collection in Historical Context*. It makes clear that Bührle was an unscrupulous armaments industrialist who profited from Nazi rule in several ways: as an arms manufacturer, forced labour profiteer and art collector.¹³

The research makes clear that the manufacturer helped Germany quietly re-arm before the Second World War and that for many years the German army, plus any other country involved in the war, was supplied with weapons. To give an idea of the well-researched sources in the abovementioned study, I will quote here extensively:

Emil Bührle became a sergeant at the beginning of the First World War and then a lieutenant in the 2nd Squadron of the 3rd Baden Dragoon Regiment. He was deployed to the front in France, Galicia and Romania. After an accidental injury and hospitalization, he was trained on machine guns in June 1916. At the end of the war, Bührle did not enter civilian life, but remained with his unit, which joined General von Roeder’s Freiwilliges Landes-Schützen-Korps. This Freikorps was deployed in various places against demonstrations and left-wing

uprisings. It is not possible to determine what Bührlé's task was in detail on the basis of this regimental memorandum. However, in his 1954 lecture "Vom Werden meiner Sammlung" ("On the Making of My Collection"), Bührlé explicitly mentions the "defeat of the communist uprisings." This attitude went down well with the audience in the Cold War era. The fighting against insurgents and the deployment in the riots continued until March 1919. Bührlé's company was stationed in Berlin, and Bührlé was a staff guard and reserve at the headquarters of General von Roeder during the operation. Due to a lack of sources, we do not know what tasks and assignments Bührlé was actually entrusted with during this time. It should be noted, however, that Waldemar Pabst, who led the counterrevolutionary Kapp Putsch against the young Weimar Republic in March 1920 together with General Erich Ludendorff and who was subsequently active in right-wing extremist paramilitary organisations in Bavaria and Austria, often stayed in Switzerland. As an employee of the Defence Economics and Armaments Office of the "Third Reich," he [Pabst] was often in Switzerland. As Armaments Officer of the "Third Reich" and a confidant of the Rheinmetall-Borsig company, he maintained numerous contacts in Switzerland, especially with the Solothurn arms factory and the WO. Pabst finally settled in Switzerland in August 1943. In September 1944, the Federal Councillor Eduard von Steiger declared Pabst an undesirable person. However,



Pabst found the support of influential circles within the arms industry and politics. An acquaintance of Bührle's, Eugen Bircher, division commander and leading member of the right wing of the Peasants', Tradesmen's and Citizens' Party (today: SVP), played a particularly important role. Apparently, in these circles Pabst's disreputable past was no reason to refuse him support. Pabst, who continued to be active in radical right-wing circles, remained a resident of Switzerland until 1955. His name even appears in correspondence contained in the archives of the Emil Bührle Collection Foundation: at the beginning of 1954, the Major thanked the Oerlikon industrialist for a New Year's calendar (of the WO?) and referred to the fact that he had been asked by "Geneva" (i.e. Hispano-Suiza) to establish contacts in the Federal Republic of Germany; finally, he told Bührle about artworks by a Munich gallery owner. This late and isolated correspondence is an indication of the long-standing acquaintance of Pabst and Bührle. It also underscores how the networks of covert German rearmament of the interwar period continued into the Federal Republic."¹⁴

I am well aware that it is quite unusual to cite at such length, but I want to give the full texture of the original publication, and since some newspapers reported some interventions or negotiations around the report, I wanted to give you an inside look at the original research results.¹⁵

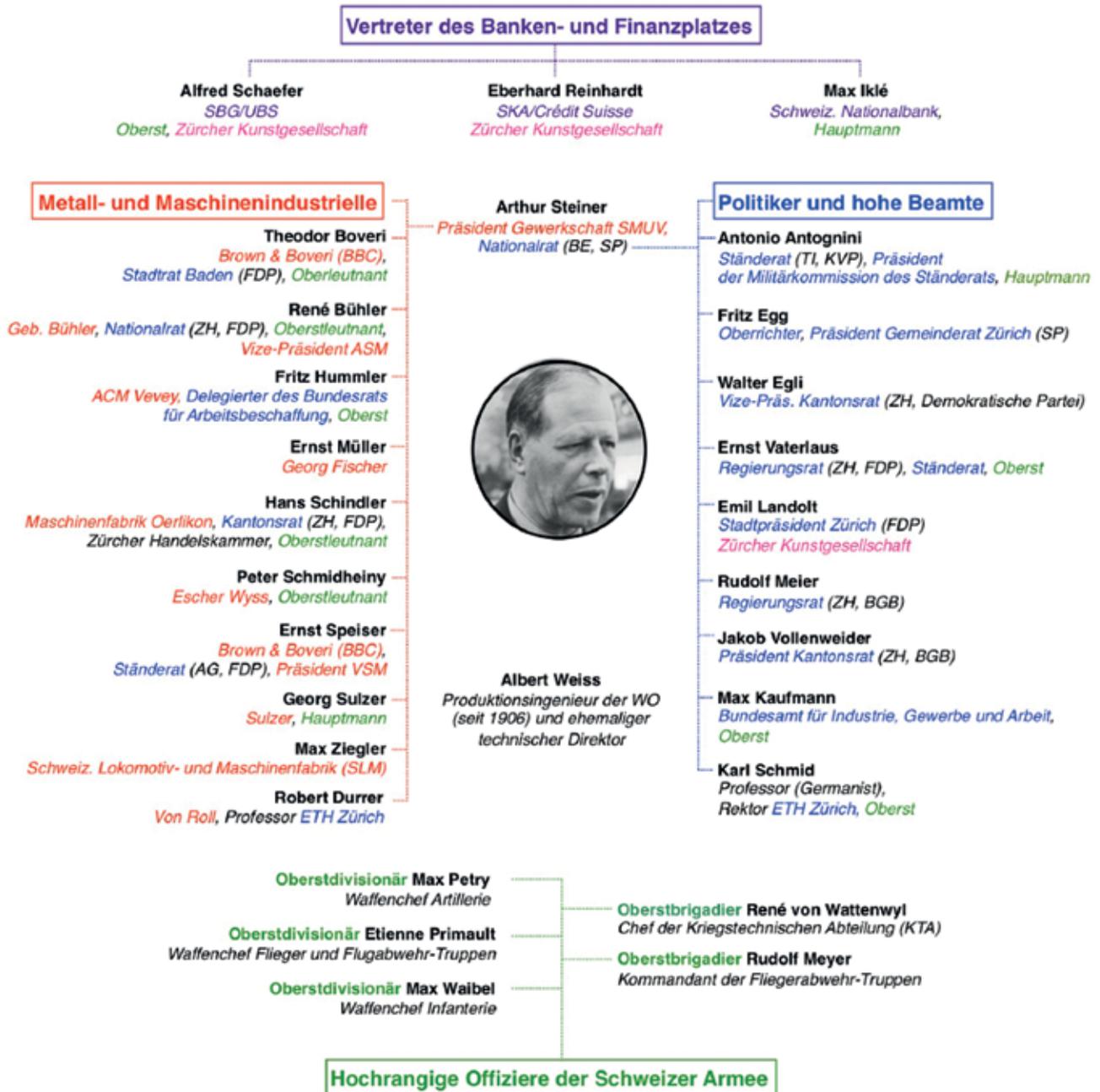
Thus, the basis of one major collection in Zurich lies in the military-industrial complex, founded by an ultra-rich warlord. It makes my heart ache when I think of a man who made millions and millions, who supplied weapons to Nazi Germany, which was responsible for the torture and death of millions of people, Jews, Roma, Antifascists... My heart aches when I think about Walter Benjamin, as one of many persecuted, who took his own life when he tried unsuccessfully to enter Spain...My heart aches...

This history permeates into the present. The connotation of these men's military alliance is still at play. Some of the historical meetings of the board reflect Switzerland's military industrial complex.¹⁶ The collection is connected with this heritage, and Hulda's rather mocking remarks reveal an inner truth: that the exclusion of women is inherent to a system in which big money, artwashing, and the military elite unite.

A heroine of the Zurich art scene is the artist Elisabeth Eberle. For years now, she has been counting the numbers of shows by male and female artists, and she confronts responsible curators and art administrators of the city with this imbalance.¹⁷ In an interview I conducted with her, she described how she herself came across this extreme imbalance in numerous awards, scholarships, and grants rather by chance. When she brought it to the attention of the respective administrators, she was dismissively rebuked or told that such enquiries would make her unpopular and could have a negative impact on her artistic career. In the meantime, she began to show her vast archive of gender imbalance as an artwork and to initiate public debates on various platforms. On a very superficial level, the art institutions began to react to the public critique and to change slightly the tone of presentations on their websites and social media. The movement gained momentum, and more and more feminists joined. To show the breadth of those involved, Elisabeth Eberle, together with artist Ursina Roesch and cultural blogger Freya Sutter, launched a postcard campaign to the Kunsthhaus, with each woman protesting the imbalance in her own way. The award-winning journalist Nina Schedlmayer,¹⁸ who enquired at the Kunsthhaus, was curtly told that yes, they had received "some" postcards. In the ensuing debate in a local newspaper, the *Tagesanzeiger*, a quota for female artists was demanded.¹⁹ Eberle used the subsequent flood of letters to the editor, often with grotesque, and disgusting

2.7. EINORDNUNG: BÜHRLE, EINE GEWICHTIGE ZÜRCHER FAMILIE

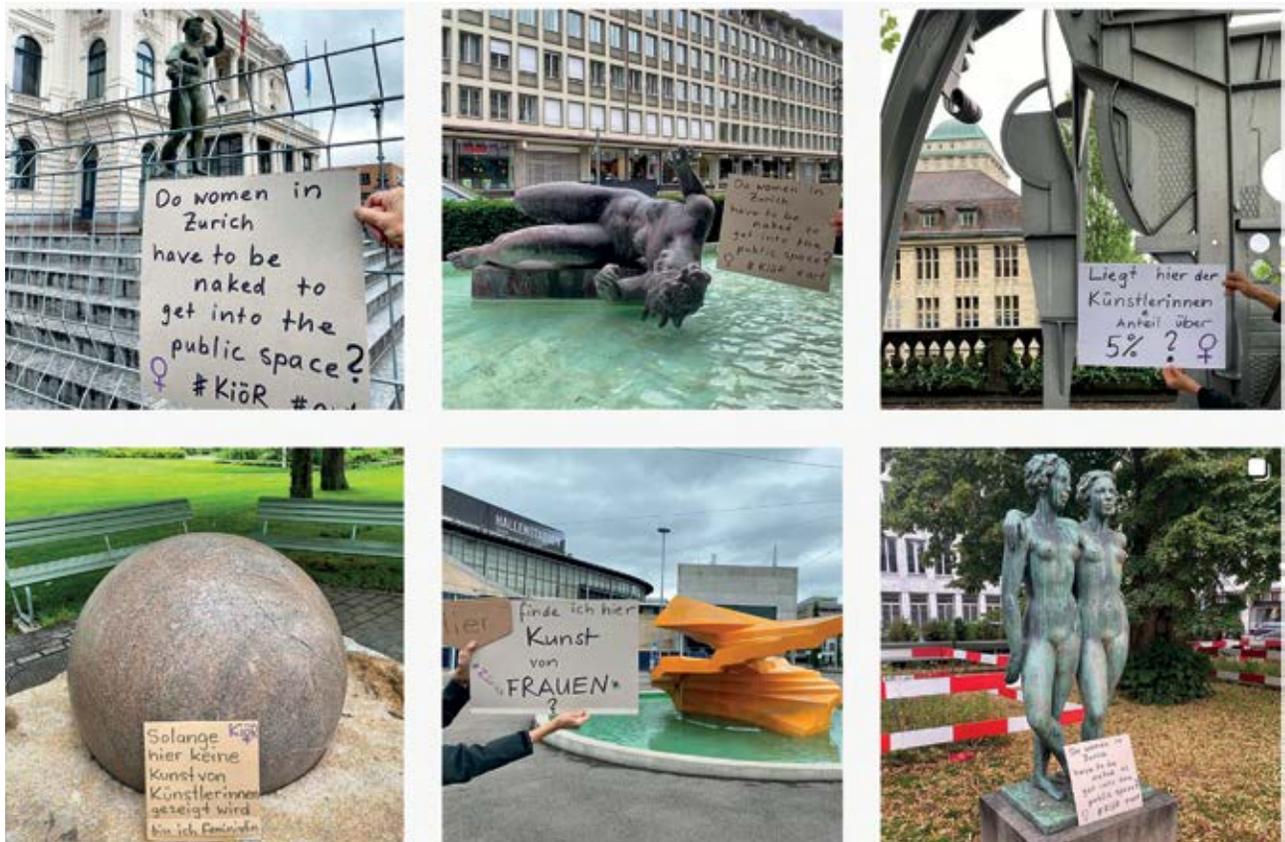
Schema 7. Eine «Musterkarte der politisch-wirtschaftlich-militärischen Machtpositionen», Hochrangige geladene Gäste an Emil Bührles Tisch (19. Oktober 1956)



Quelle: Rheinmetall B5354 (WO/OB Archiv), Ordner 0001: 50 Jahre WO 1956, Tischplan für das Jubiläumsbankett im oberen Speisesaal des Wohlfahrtshauses der Werkzeugmaschinenfabrik Oerlikon-Bührle & Co. am 19. Oktober 1956. Eigene Recherche und Darstellung. Dieses Schema entspricht nicht der Sitzordnung des Banketts.

content, as source material for an artwork: the letters are read out by a monotonous male computer voice, revealing their ridiculous, almost tragically backward-looking attitudes. Ever so slowly, through Elisabeth's relentless exposure of obvious injustices alongside the sarcastic comments of Hulda Zwingli as a media persona via Instagram, concessions have been made by the art institutions, at least on the surface. I know this will be a long and hard battle that we will not win immediately. But it is more than a fight for numbers. As I have tried to show, it is a long-term fight against patriarchal, sometimes inhuman, backward-looking politics, which are also reflected in image politics. The concentration of white male artists and their products are more than just that, and to think about that on a more theoretical level, I will argue what an art institution is.

For Danto, contemporary art is not characterised by a self-evident tradition; in his view, artworks are constructed under the specific constrained conditions of the artworld, and here is where curating comes in: it is constructed specifically **for the act of presenting**. In this view, contemporary art only comes into existence **by being exhibited**. So, one important task of exhibiting is simply to transform objects or actions into art. In John Searle's remarks on institutions, he first discusses the institution of economy, which is based on a construction, on institutionalized facts: a group of people have agreed to understand a package of paper as possessing a certain value. "For economics, the mode of existence of the 'commodities' and the mechanisms of 'disposal' are institutional."²⁰ Or, for example, a figure in sports that is called a "touch-back" only makes sense if you are familiar with the rules of the game. So, in his view, **language** implies a social contract from the very start.



But of course if you presuppose language, you have already presupposed institutions. It is, for example, a stunning fact about the Social Contract theorists that they take for granted that people speak a language and then ask how these people might form a social contract. But it is implicit in the theory of speech acts that, if you have a community of people talking to each other, performing speech acts, you already have a social contract. [...]. Instead of presupposing language and analyzing institutions, we have to analyze the role of language in the constitution of institutions.²¹

Searle also distinguishes facts such as given objects, for example rocks, from institutional facts: “As a preliminary formulation, we can state our conclusions so far as follows: an institutional fact is any fact that has the logical structure *X counts as Y in C*, where the *Y* term assigns a status function and (with few exceptions) the status function carries a deontology. An institution is any system of constitutive rules of the form *X counts as Y in C*. Once an institution becomes established, it then provides a structure within which one can create institutional facts.”²² To establish a certain logical structure under which *X* (Brillo Box) counts as *Y* (art object) in a specific context (artworld), it also needs a shared intentionality of a specific group. To agree on a certain set of rules (via language or as language), a collective intentionality is also needed. “Collective intentionality covers not only collective intentions but also such other forms of intentionality as collective beliefs and collective desires,”²³ as he states. A social fact is different from facts that are hard facts; existing without an agreement of any sort is then any fact that involves the collective intentionality of two or more agents. Andrea Fraser made a similar argument:

Art is not art because it is signed by an artist or shown in a museum or any other ‘institutional’ site. Art is art when it exists for discourses and practices that recognize it as art, value and evaluate it as art, and consume it as art, whether as object, gesture, representation, or only idea. The institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as art. No matter how public in placement, immaterial, transitory, relational, everyday, or even invisible, what is announced and perceived as art is always already institutionalized, simply because it exists within the perception of participants in the field of art as art, a perception not necessarily aesthetic but fundamentally social in its determination.²⁴

In conclusion, we, as feminists, disagree on a certain set of rules of the art field. However, this also means that all of us, as participants, as part of the collective will, can also be part of a process of institutional transformation. It is clear that we do not simply want inclusion as represented by statistics, we want other forms of art.²⁵

We want art that does not serve the whitewashing of the military industrial complex and the accumulation of capital, but art that propagates social change. We want socially relevant art, we want diversification at all institutional levels, not only of the artworks exhibited, but the audience, the staff, and the board. We also want a form of redistribution of wealth within art. If Angela Dimitrakaki and Nizan Shaked’s²⁶ analysis is correct, and competition and rivalry for the highest price are inscribed in the art system, then at the very least the profits from the great art trade must flow back to a completely different extent. They must be furthermore distributed in ways that recognise historical appropriations and exploitations. The surplus should go back to the great mass of the art scene, to the dark matter of the artists, curators, and cultural producers who never make a large income, but who are eminently important for the

emergence of a lively art scene. We would like to see a redistribution of art budgets; private collections should not burden state finances, and art budgets should be allocated under conditions that take race, class, and gender into account.

Back to the spoiler alert: these transformations will not happen without a fight; to take up this fight is what instituting feminism means. And if you and your peers need some encouragement, post your issues on social media and take the book by Helen Lewis in hand, *Difficult Women: A History of Feminism in 11 Fights*,²⁷ think about what the 12th should be!²⁸ Let's go for it!



Notes

- 1** Johan Hartle in an online talk for a PhD meeting at the Zurich University of the Arts, “Art as institutional practice,” 9 September 2020.
- 2** George Dickie, “The New Institutional Theory of Art,” in *Proceedings of the 8th Wittgenstein Symposium* 10 (1983), 57-64, reprinted in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition, An Anthology*, 2nd edition, eds. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2019).
- 3** The artist Ferdinand Hodler might not be well-known in an English-speaking context, but he is seen as an important Swiss artist, at least in Switzerland. For example, at Fondation Beyeler, they praise him as an artist “whose paintings shaped the image and self-image of Switzerland like no other painter, was also one of the most important artists of the transition from the 19th century to modernity.” See: <https://www.fondationbeyeler.ch/ausstellungen/vergangene-ausstellungen/ferdinand-hodler>, last accessed 28 March 2021 (translation by the author).
- 4** For the original text in German, see Hulda Zwingli Instagram account (@huldazwingli), last accessed 17 March 2021 (translation by the author).
- 5** Peter Buerger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974).
- 6** John R. Searle, “What is an institution?,” *Journal of Institutional Economics* 1, no. 1 (2005):1–22, 1.
- 7** A relatively drastic example of this was provided by the collector Michael Ringier himself, when he said in an interview that his advisor and the former director of the Kunsthalle Zurich, Beatrix Ruf, had received a voluntary gift of one million francs from him out of gratitude for her advice. One can only speculate what this means in relation to the increase in value of the art he acquired, see here: Andreas Tobler, “Ringier und seine Millionenmacherin, Wie der Schweizer Verleger von einer staatlich subventionierten Lücke profitiert haben könnte,” *Tagesanzeiger Sonntagszeitung*, 4 December 2017, translation of the title: Ringier and his millionaire maker: How the Swiss publisher may have profited from a state-subsidised loophole, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/sonntagszeitung/ringier-und-seine-millionenmacherin/story/20260324>
- 8** See Aline Wanner and Christina Neuhaus (Interview), “Eine Hodler-Ausstellung wäre schon interessant. FDP gegen SVP, Manager gegen Unternehmer, verhinderter Hotelier gegen verhinderten Knecht: Walter Kielholz trifft Christoph Blocher” NZZ Folio (Sept. 2020) (translation by the author): “A Hodler exhibition would be interesting. FDP versus SVP, manager versus entrepreneur, frustrated hotelier versus frustrated farmhand: Walter Kielholz meets Christoph Blocher,” the interview starts with the following introduction (translation by the author): “They are considered enemies. As alpha dogs who have cultivated their mutual antipathy for decades, Walter Kielholz accused Christoph Blocher of having turned the SVP into a ‘right-wing bourgeois fighting party’. Blocher told the *Weltwoche* last year: ‘The NZZ is currently the mouthpiece against a self-confident Switzerland. The driving forces are to be found at the epicentre of Credit Suisse and its surroundings.’ He was referring to Kielholz. Now, the two gentlemen meet in the panelled committee room of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* for their first double interview. Christoph Blocher has come by train, Walter Kielholz on foot. They talk about the EU, the institutional agreement, their own origins, Migros and ignorant foreign managers. After more than two hours, it becomes clear that the old adversaries have more in common than they would like.” And it ends with the following paragraph: “Interviewer: Together with your wife, you were a gallery owner for a short time. Would that tempt you again?
Kielholz: No, I got bored after a year.
Blocher: Art is a point of contact between us.”

Interviewer: You are an art collector, Mr Kielholz is the president of the Zürcher Kunsthausgesellschaft.

Blocher: I don't donate my paintings to the state, nor do I make a foundation.

Kielholz: By the way, the Kunsthaus is private, not state-owned. And it would be interesting to have another big Hodler exhibition.

Blocher: You can count on me for that. I'm generous when it comes to loaning works. You can find my pictures in exhibitions all over the world.

Interviewer: Mr Kielholz, do you have any regrets in life?

Kielholz: Of course I've made mistakes from time to time, I haven't assessed developments correctly. When you do something, you make mistakes. But if you don't do anything, you don't make any and yet in the end you're bitter because you always would have known better, it's just that no one was interested. When I was 20, I never dreamed I would have such an interesting life."

9 "Swelling" indicates the name of the person responsible for the press releases at the Kunsthaus, in German: *quellend*, his name is Quellenberg.

10 Hulda Zwingli Instagram account (@huldazwingli), last accessed 17 March 2021 (translation by the author).

11 See the brochure with the party's platform, "Die rechtliche und tatsächliche Gleichstellung aller Geschlechter ist eines der wichtigsten Anliegen der SP. Die Partei setzt sich auf allen Ebenen für Selbstbestimmung, Chancengleichheit und gegen Diskriminierungen aufgrund des Geschlechts, der sexuellen Orientierung und/oder der Geschlechtsidentität ein.," in *Legislaturziele der SP-Fraktion 2019 bis 2023*, article 17, p. 47.

12 Historisches Seminar – Forschungsstelle für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Lehrstuhl Prof. Dr. Matthieu Leimgruber, Erich Keller, Mattieu Leimgruber, *Kriegsgeschäfte, Kapital und Kunsthaus, Die Entstehung der Sammlung Bührle im historischen Kontext*, Zurich 2021, 78-79.

13 Kito Nedo, "Museen und NS-Zeit:Verhängnisvolle Verbindungen," *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 24 February 2021, last accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/kunst-museen-buehrle-zuerich-raubkunst-1.5216494> (translation by the author).

14 Erich Keller, Mattieu Leimgruber, *Kriegsgeschäfte, Kapital und Kunsthaus* (translation by the author).

15 Fabian Baumgartner, Marc Tribelhorn, «Anregungen» und andere Druckversuche: Wie Forschungsarbeiten zum Waffenfabrikanten Bührle beeinflusst werden» («Sug-gestions» and other attempt to put pressure: How research on the arms manufacturer Bührle is influenced) NZZ 28.Aug. 2020 <https://www.nzz.ch/zuerich/waffenhaendler-buehrle-forschungsarbeiten-liefen-aus-dem-ruder-ld.1573137> (translation by the author).

16 Sketch from the above mentioned Historisches Seminar – Forschungsstelle für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Lehrstuhl Prof. Dr. Matthieu Leimgruber, Erich Keller, Matthieu Leimgruber, *Kapital und Kunsthaus, Die Entstehung der Sammlung Bührle im historischen Kontext*, 133.

The explanation below reads as follows (translation by the author): "Scheme 7 confirms findings of recent research on Swiss elites in the 20th century: Many of these men were simultaneously represented in different spheres of power and exhibit strong social cohesion. For example, while five professional officers of very high rank were present at table A, almost half of the remaining 24 guests were militia officers—an observation that would also have applied to numerous other people present that evening.

Emil Bührle did not have all the classic attributes of the 'power elite' (e.g. membership of or alliances with influential families, political offices and military degrees, as well as

mandates in various boards of directors), which makes his extraordinary social position, which he managed to stage by occupying table A, all the more remarkable.” Bührlé had to concentrate after the Second World War on the Swiss army, but, of course, he soon had other customers—for example, West Germany; for a more detailed report, see the study.

17 Dorothee Richter, Interview with Elisabeth Eberle, in “Zurich Issue: Dark Matter, Grey Zones, Red Light and Bling Bling,” *OnCurating* 48 (2020), last accessed 18 March 2021, <https://on-curating.org/issue-48-reader/elisabeth-eberle.html#.YFPM2h0xk34>.

18 Nina Schedlmayer, award-winning art critic, Vienna, <https://artemisia.blog/2019/11/22/einseitig-maennerlastig-kaum-kuenstlerinnen-im-kunsthause-zuerich/>.

19 See Andreas Tobler, “Eine Quote für Kunst von Frauen – subito!” *Tagesanzeiger*, 23 January 2020, last accessed 18 March 2021, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kultur/kunst/eine-quote-fuer-kunst-von-frauen-subito/story/10261439>.

20 Searle, “What is an institution?”

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique,” *Artforum* (September 2005), 281.

25 In the meantime, a female director, Ann Demeester, was appointed, partially thanks to the pressure from different sides; Hulda Zwingli received some international acknowledgement, but, of course, what we demand is a change on many levels of the institution and a redistribution of cultural surplus.

26 Angela Dimitrakaki and Nizan Shaked, “Feminism, Instituting, and the Politics of Recognition,” in “Instituting Feminism,” eds. Helena Reckitt and Dorothee Richter, *OnCurating* 52 (2021).

27 Helen Lewis, *Difficult Women, A History of Feminism in 11 Fights* (London: Random House, 2020).

28 And for my feminist co-travellers through space and time, Andrea Fraser, Westreich Wagner, and the CCA Wattis Institute, with the support of a group of co-researchers, have conducted a major investigation into museums in the US, which can be used as the groundwork: Andrea Fraser, *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, Westreich Wagner Publications, the CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, 2018).

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 director of the PhD in Practice in Curating Programme, a cooperation of the Zurich University of the Arts and the University of Reading. Richter has worked extensively as a curator: she was initiator of Curating Degree Zero Archive, Curator of Kuenstlerhaus Bremen, at which she curated different symposia on feminist issues in contemporary arts and an archive on feminist practices, Materialien/Materials; recently she directed, together with Ronald Kolb, a film on Fluxus: *Flux Us Now, Fluxus Explored with a Camera*. She is executive editor of OnCurating.org.

**Section 2:
Theory into Practice:
Feminist Instituting
Then and Now**

Institutional Inreach as a Feminist Curatorial Methodology

Emelie Chhangur interviewed by Jennifer Fisher

This interview took place in December 2020 as Emelie Chhangur was beginning her tenure as the Director-Curator of Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario. Emelie's work has been distinguished by her incorporation of feminist and decolonizing curatorial initiatives within the infrastructures of diverse exhibitions. After seventeen years at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) in Toronto—where she produced such large-scale projects such as *The Awakening* and *RISE* (discussed below)—she was appointed Director-Curator of Agnes Etherington Art Centre with the mandate to oversee a major renovation of this gallery, originally founded by the suffragette and art patron Agnes Etherington and donated to the City of Kingston in 1954.

In the current neoliberal climate of Canadian public galleries, Emelie is instituting a curatorial mode that she defines as “inreach,” a non-extractive model for decolonizing the museum and its curatorial practices. Emelie discusses her engagement of intersectional feminism in reimagining the new museum to align with Indigenous self-determination and reciprocal ethics that resist the relentless outcomes demanded by the neoliberal gallery. She acknowledges the intergenerational legacy of an institution founded by a woman, as well as the agency of strong women leaders throughout its historical continuum, by sustaining dynamic collaborations and supporting reflexive ways of working with the gallery and its collections. At the same time, Emelie will be putting institutional resources towards enlivening the gallery through residencies, sustained conversations, and collaborations. At its heart, Emelie's practice generates new forms of curatorial knowledge by cultivating innovative contingencies for diversity in contemporary art. Her reimagining of this art institution provides a groundbreaking model for redefining colonial and hierarchical museum structures and roles, all of which have tangible ramifications for broader social and cultural change.

Jennifer Fisher: I wanted to start with your idea of “institutional inreach,” which I think is particularly relevant to instituting feminism. Can you describe this curatorial methodology in light of its impact on gallery operations?

Emelie Chhangur: Inreach developed while I was working at the Art Gallery of York University in response to cultural practices that I perceived as incommensurable to conventional art institution protocols of “out-reach.” It became clear that it was not the communities that we were working with at the AGYU that had to change, but rather the gallery itself. There are relationship-based aspects of inreach as well as practical aspects. Initially, inreach developed out of Indigenous consensus models, which involved thinking about care in terms of what it takes to reciprocally build trust. Working closely with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, I learned that the temporality of trust is incompatible with the timelines of institutional practices driven by outcomes at the expense of processes.

There was also a pragmatic side to inreach. The Indigenous cash economy challenged university protocols of reimbursement because either we couldn't get a receipt, or payment involved invasive inquiries about citizenship and status. In the cultural protocol of the Pow Wow, one might give an envelope of cash to the lead performer who would determine how the money would be distributed amongst the drummers, singers, or dancers. Of course, as a cultural institution, we want to pay artists. The scenario of compensation presented the opportunity to rethink the gallery's institutional practices in order to negotiate an appropriate way to contribute to the culture of the Mississaugas of the Credit. Instead of paying artists' fees, we funded a language camp that summer, which followed the Indigenous model of contributing to the greater good of the nation. This system of remuneration served to both preserve an endangered Indigenous language and provided a way for individuals to give back to commu-

nity through participation in the project. In this instance, inreach involved contributing to the collective rather than the individual. Through its role in respecting different cultural protocols, social economics and ways of working, the gallery was transformed from within.

JF: How do you perceive inreach as a feminist curatorial mode in relation to questions of decolonizing institutions currently underway in Canada in universities, museums, galleries, and public institutions?

EC: Inreach is a deep form of hospitality. When you invite the other into the home, you had better be prepared to change the home. Yet, the very structures of the museum are incompatible with the ceremonies of Indigenous people. In order to perform a smudge,¹ —a purification ceremony involving the burning of sweetgrass, cedar, sage, and tobacco—at the Art Gallery of Ontario, sprinklers had to be turned off and the HVAC adjusted. The museum is a Western structure that doesn't take into account, in its processes and protocols, anything other than a colonial system. And then there is the actual feeling involved with what it means to “care” as a curator. Rather than thinking about care in terms of how we work with artists, it becomes about caring about the futures of art institutions and how they participate actively in the civic and social milieu in which they operate.

JF: You curated a collaborative project with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation at the Art Gallery of Ontario. This event took place in Walker Court, a rotunda space normally used for secular ceremonies and events. Can you describe this ceremony and its significance?

EC: As a curator, I'm interested in appropriating existing dramaturgical forms like civic ceremonies or street processions and recasting the characters of these social dramas with individuals and groups who are not necessarily at the civic heart of the city, or at the center of its institutions. *The Awakening* (2011) was framed as a civic ceremonial and staged at Walker Court of the Art Gallery of Ontario, which for me was a locale of public address. Developed out of a three-year collaboration with Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and young parkour athletes from the metropolitan area, the ceremony was an action to “rally the spirits” in a ceremony dedicated to the future of art.



Humberto Vélez, *The Awakening/Giigozhkozimín*, 2009-2011. Performance Documentation. A participatory collaboration between the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and Parkour. Curated by Emelie Chhangur. Performance staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario on May 14, 2011. Photo: Len Grant

This occurred May 14, 2011, right after the Mississaugas of the Credit settled the largest land claim in Canadian history. Referred to as the 1805 “Toronto Purchase,” it took until 2010 to settle, a process the Mississaugas of the Credit began in 1998.²

To prepare for the ceremony, we had gone together to the AGO where we were inspired by a quote attributed to visionary Métis politician Louis Riel (1844-1885): “My people will sleep for one hundred years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.”³ Riel's prophecy became a through-line to the choreography, which combined Indigenous powwow dancing⁴ and gravity-defying parkour athletics. Spirits of Indigenous ancestors, conjured as the parkours descended in space, participated in a ceremony dedicated to the future of art. This event coincided with a massive shift: a moment that land acknowledgements honouring Indigenous predecessors began to enter public discourse in Toronto.



Humberto Vélez, *The Awakening / Giigozhkozimin*, 2009-2011. Performance Documentation. A participatory collaboration between the Mississaugas of the New Credit First Nation and Parkour. Curated by Emelie Chhangur. Performance staged at the Art Gallery of Ontario on May 14, 2011. Photo: Len Grant

JF: You are the new Director-Curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre at Queens University about to begin a major renovation of the gallery. It is very exciting that you have this opportunity to transform an art institution. Of course, the gallery will continue to program solo and group exhibitions, acquisitions, publications, and so forth. I wanted to ask you: where do you see the new Agnes putting its resources? How is feminism guiding your plans for the gallery?

EC: Much of my own practice has been about setting people into relation and working across cultural difference. I think of the Directorship in terms of a curatorial project that puts elements side by side in relation in order to bring new forms into the world. That's what the curatorial does. It does not necessarily need to be tied to art objects. At Agnes, curating can occur in relation to donors, in relation to acquisitions, in relation to projects, in relation to Queen's University, or in relation to a public. All these entities can be thought about curatorially. I believe that how something is made will determine what gets made. How might we reimagine Agnes with our practices of care?

Agnes Etherington (1880-1954), a longstanding patron of the arts in Kingston and member of the suffragette movement, planted the seeds for "Agnes" as early as the 1930s and '40s when she created a summer school for artists at Queens. But it was with her invitation to

Quebec painter André Bieler to become artist-in-residence that her plans grew.⁵ Upon her death in 1954, she bequeathed her house to Queen's University on the condition that an art centre be established to "further the cause of art and community."⁶ Officially, Agnes, the art centre, opened to the public in 1957. I'm interested in this origin of the art centre, and I'm beginning with a simple gesture of returning the house to a home. Turning the house back into a home puts hospitality at the center of the museum's ethos, and everything gets built around this notion. Upstairs will now be a four-bedroom apartment for residencies. This affords the opportunity for artists to work in the larger context of Kingston, which is Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe territory with a large Métis population. Kingston was the original capital of Canada, the colonial heart of darkness in the nation's history. It is the place where the first prime minister, John A. MacDonal, grew up and took office. He was the architect of the Indian Act, which institutionalized the genocidal Residential School System. With four prisons, Kingston is also a town of incarceration, which doesn't surprise me looking at its past. So, to engage these histories, we will work with artists during residencies. Having artists live inside the museum changes both the feeling and idea of the art institution. The downstairs of the house will be a community-facing hub for the university and community events. To have people coming and going from a museum at all hours is already a proposition that

dismantles the institution because museums are all about security. Notions of care as embedded in museological approaches to collections can look more like protection. This means that the house will have to be on an external security perimeter to allow for the movement of people and energies, coming and going, that happen outside the hours of 9-5. This is one aspect of the necessary dismantling of bureaucracies that determine behavior inside a museum in order to inscribe conditions with hospitality as a driving force.

JF: How are feminist and decolonizing practices informing your rethinking of the curatorial practices involving the collection?

EC: The Agnes's collection is vast—17,000 objects—and contains artifacts that include what is known in an Indigenous world view as “historicized ancestors,” customarily used in ceremony and kept by their communities. Historicized ancestors are living entities: they breathe, they are in relation, they are activated, they are a part of culture. As living entities, their location in the Western museum has taken that life away. Taking them outside their communities is in fact a practice of incarceration. At Agnes, we are going through what might be called an emancipation of living ancestors. The collection also includes human remains, which are deeply inappropriate for a museum to hold. These sorts of considerations will determine the practices and spaces of the new Agnes. The space for the historicized ancestors must allow the elements of feeding, visitation, and ceremony that can happen for many hours. The feeling of coming into the museum cannot be one of incarceration and trauma. So, the entrance needs to be carefully considered. When elements around ceremony involving food or tobacco need to happen in relation to the objects, practices of conservation and museum standards can be challenged. Likewise, museum dictates of “no touching” are contrary to an Indigenous world view where a way of preserving the entities involves touching them.

JF: At one point, we had a conversation where you talked about the legacy of strong women at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre. Can you speak a bit more about your perception of women predecessors as part of a feminist curatorial practice?

EC: I'm proud to work in an institution named after a woman. I dropped the “the” in front of Agnes when I arrived. When I'm producing a support letter, for instance most recently for our Isabel Bader Fellowship

in Textile Conservation and Research, I write “Agnes will contribute \$28,000 to this fellow...” To think of “Agnes” as the doer is to think of the institution as this woman. The gestures of the institution are based upon the notion of the woman running her home. I've been considering these implications regarding government arts funding. When the home incorporates feminist practices, it means that we might spend that money in a different way determined by how we are contributing to the greater good of society as a whole. How might institutional agency become a gesture of artmaking and healing?

I think of myself on a continuum of a long history of strong women leaders at Agnes who have moved the institution forward. It's about building on our work as women rather than tearing it down. As I deal with building a new facility, I've been reflecting on the action of “tearing down,” which actually is quite aggressive. Instead, I'm interested in how we might build upon the sedimentary layers of women and their influence over this institution. Often, directors come in and erase and dismantle. Sometimes it's change-for-change's sake in order to leave a mark. Beyond what an individual does inside a museum, I'm interested in challenging the curatorial to encompass a practice of relationality that is building otherwise.

JF: During one visit to the Art Gallery of York University when you were still Curator there, I remember you speaking about the program that provided a safe space to nurture the talents of youth from the Jane and Finch neighborhood, a community marked by gangs and gun violence. The participating teenagers became so comfortable in the space with staff that they would come to the gallery to hang out and be creative. They were at home there. Subsequently, you produced *RISE*, a project with artists Bárbara Wagner & Benjamin de Burca that, once again, brought members of this community into relationship with the gallery over a long period of time. It is beautiful that some of these kids appear as the protagonists in Bárbara and Benjamin's extraordinary film. *RISE* is the outcome of a sustained, intersectional curatorial practice. Can you speak a bit more about the complex relations activated through the project?

EC: It is important to work with artists from elsewhere to mobilize something new in your local. *RISE* was filmed on the Toronto Transit Commission's (TTC's) new suburban Line 1 subway extension, which to me represented a geographical realignment of the city. Bárbara and Benjamin worked in a concentrated way on



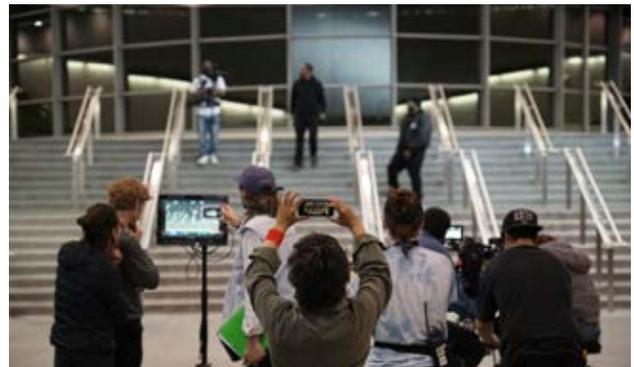
RISE, still (Nasim Asgari and Timaaj Hassen), 2K, colour, 5.1 sound, 20 min. Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2018. Executive Producer: Emelie Chhangur. Image: courtesy of Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



RISE, still (Dynesti), 2K, colour, 5.1 sound, 20 min. Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2018. Executive Producer: Emelie Chhangur. Image: courtesy of Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



RISE, still (Jameel3ND, Es-Ef, NamedTobias.), 2K, colour, 5.1 sound, 20 min. Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2018. Executive Producer: Emelie Chhangur. Image: courtesy of Fortes D'Aloia & Gabriel, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



RISE, production still: "Prologue" (York University Subway Station), Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca, 2018. Executive Producer: Emelie Chhangur. Image: courtesy of the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto.

RISE. During their three-month residency, they stayed in the Jane-Finch community and lived at York in order to be neighbors to the protagonists of the film. They also travelled frequently to Scarborough to attend an open mike event called "R.I.S.E." which stands for "Reaching Intelligent Souls Everywhere," founded by spoken-word artist Randell Adjei. By engaging the two communities, the project initiated a change of Gestalt where Scarborough, a peripheral, long-degraded suburb, arose as a heart of culture. The artists' oscillation between Jane-Finch and Scarborough created a collaboration between the east and west end communities, which have been largely separated by gang violence, by geography, by the inability to travel across the city because of lack of transit. In creating the film, the movement of the artists themselves created a much-needed suburb-to-suburb solidarity between the Jane-Finch and Scarborough spoken word, rap, dance, and music communities. We also involved film students from York on the crew and research teams.

Collaborating with poets and rappers comes from a decade-long engagement with the Jane-Finch community that started out as workshops and slowly became a massive program over twelve years. I worked in partnership with my AGYU colleague Allyson Adley, who would be conventionally known as the Collections and Education Assistant. Education falls under her purview. While for some institutions public programming is one area and exhibitions another, as a feminist curator, I resist the hierarchical siloing of roles and am more interested in how a project like *RISE* can act to change the activities of the institution. While Allyson's concerns were the ethics around community engagement, as the curator of the project I brought the artists to the residency and supported the integrity of the artists' vision. Collaborating with Allyson meant that both community engagement and artistic vision were embedded in the project. We were always each other's check and balance. One role was not valued over the other. Likewise, the poets and rappers from Jane-Finch were considered as equal collaborators, alongside



Agnes Etherington Art Centre 2020, Queens University, Kingston;
Photo: Tim Forbes.



Agnes Etherington's House, Historic View post 1924.

Bárbara and Benjamin. We were always incorporating and questioning the ethics around collaboration, community engagement and who becomes a subject or object of artmaking practices. At every turn, the project created relations: between the Jane-Finch and Scarborough communities, the York University campus, and the transit properties of the City of Toronto. Questions concerning the participation of the artists, the historical relations of Black bodies within the public sphere, and creating more equitable spaces in society are at the heart of these projects and inform the curatorial work.⁷

JF: Agnes is going to be shut down during construction. What is the schedule for Agnes's closing and reopening?

EC: As we prepare for closure, we are lending resources to activities that are already happening in Kingston. One of our last gestures will be to bring the streets into the gallery. I am working on an exhibition with local graffiti artists who will make work directly on the walls of the Etherington House. Bringing different initiatives into the institution sustains Agnes's visionary patronage. Given the town-and-gown divide permeating the dual mandate of a gallery serving both the university and the public, my concern has become increasingly oriented more to how Agnes *attends to* the community. Closing Agnes also allows us to curate outside of the space. I've been working with Radio EE, nomadic radio practitioners who are interested in moving across the land, who talk about movement, diaspora, and migration by patching into nodes of transmission and revealing places of absence. Residencies will start to establish long-term relationships with communities that haven't felt that they belong to the gallery or campus. I'm instituting inreach through the ways we're working through closure

at Agnes, so that when it reopens the real work will begin. All of this is the set-up for the practices and people to come.

How we close down Agnes will ultimately comprise a significant part of the institution's history relating to notions of care and what it means to support Indigenous self-determination in the museum. There was a push to break ground in 2022. However, working with Indigenous communities takes time. Fast-tracking a building is incommensurable with the kind of heart I want Agnes to have as an institution, so I've slowed things down. We're looking at a closure in 2023 for a few years. Closure will involve packing up 17,000 objects, procedures that not only involve care in the handling of art, but also regarding the emotional sensibilities involving the storage of history. We're developing a program of packing up the collection in real time in the galleries as a setting of ritual and renewal with the aim of responding appropriately to cultural sensitivities concerning the historicized ancestors. They cannot go into the PacArt storage facility in Toronto in a climate-controlled, sealed space, for example. What does it mean to find temporary homes for them at other cultural institutions? In Indigenous communities? And what does it mean if they don't return to the gallery? This will take time, and I don't want to treat the transformation of Agnes as a checklist. It needs to have the proper processes in place in order to enact what we want to manifest as our institutional practice.

JF: Architecturally speaking, is there going to be an expansion of square footage? What role might feminism play in the mandate for reconstruction?

EC: The new building will involve an international architectural call with a significant budget and re-build to create what will emerge as the largest university museum in Canada. In practical terms, both the exhibition space and programming space will be doubled. However, it is not the size that matters to me, but rather the intimacy and sharing that will drive Agnes's feminist ethos. On the one hand, we will generate spaces for Indigenous-led self-determination and community-facing creation within the museum. On the other hand, opportunities exist for reimagining innovations at other points of intersection. For example, co-locating with Queen's Department of Art Conservation and Art History might produce a whole generation of conservators who are well versed in the sensitivities of Indigenous self-determination and how it pertains to material culture. Examining artifacts through microscopes in labs can perpetuate the visualist separation of Western colonialism. What might it mean to conserve objects within processes of being in-relation to them?

Rather than the architecture being driven by space allocation, which sets hierarchies, I have proposed a vision ecosystem to guide our facility's re-conceptualization. As an ecosystem, the elements comprising the facility interrelate dynamically and flow multi-directionally: event spaces become exhibition spaces become academic spaces. Art production and research move seamlessly throughout the gallery spaces, the Queen's community, the publics of Kingston and beyond. Just as activities inside are integrated into the wider milieu in which we are operating, so, too, activities outside the facility have a bearing on our operations inside. This ecosystem supports the social and civic role of Agnes across multiple temporalities and diverse world views, with reciprocity as a core ethico-aesthetic function.

JF: Do you see a continuity between feminism and decolonization in terms of curating?

EC: Inreach can be considered in terms of both intersectional feminism and decolonization practice: to decolonize is to insist that there are a multiplicity of practices that sit side by side as equals, which connects to feminist practices of relationality. With both, the move is about dismantling singularities and opening up the possibility for complexity. Decolonial practice must involve an entanglement of practices and value systems. It's a way of thinking about how to hold space for multiple subject positions to remain in relation and not be in conflict. Rather than thinking in monolithic or binary distinctions, its sensibility of inclusion holds

together difference, allowing it to manifest and shape the practices we enact as curators and as institutions.

The concept of the art gallery as a "home," and what it means to reside there, is a driving force that is already transforming the program. On the one hand, we are starting to shift where exhibitions take place. For example, we're working towards an African exhibition for the large Contemporary Feature gallery space. Previously, these artworks occupied a tiny gallery, the Grey Gallery, quite literally painted grey. Spaces that lock time down are being liberated, which is a long-term, practice-based project in and of itself.

JF: You recognize that some aspects of Indigenous spirituality, for example, honoring the sanctity of the historical ancestors as living presences, require secrecy. Will bringing Indigenous practices into the museum risk revealing knowledge that should remain concealed?

EC: The reason it's difficult for colonial cultures is that settlers like transparency. I believe, as Édouard Glissant speaks about it, in one's right to opacity.⁸ If the impulse to consume and to know everything comes from a place of deep insecurity, then the museum itself must be very secure in its identity—that it doesn't need to know everything. If Indigenous communities are to conduct ceremony within Agnes, it does not necessarily mean that the ceremony becomes public. Respecting Indigenous aesthetics and ethics are part of the work museums need to do as civic entities, which may not result in a didactic, interpretative, or public-facing outcome. Negotiating the cultural practices that are not a part of the museum as a colonial structure is work that involves complexity. It may not yet be time for a public to be engaging with Indigenous sacred culture. Maybe it shouldn't happen. We have to get away from supporting the desires of the museum over the practices of the people. Dismantling the colonial habits of museums involves deep questions of ethics. There are assumptions governing notions of transparency and models of knowing that come from a Western colonial world view that sees the appropriation of other cultures as necessary to comprehending them. Perhaps if we saw it from a different perspective, we could appreciate more opacity and the appropriateness of "not knowing" something. This habit that we have to be a part of everything is a colonial impulse of conquest. This presents something of a quagmire for the art institution's mandate as a "knowledge production machine" because some things cannot be known, studied, and consumed.

Notes

- 1** Ceremonial smudging is practiced by diverse Indigenous peoples in Canada (<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/smudging>).
- 2** The Toronto Purchase, otherwise known as Treaty Number 13, was an agreement originally negotiated in 1787 (see <http://mncfn.ca/torontopurchase/>).
- 3** Quote attributed to Louis Riel, July 4, 1885, Manitoba Métis Federation, http://www.mmf.mb.ca/louis_riel_quotes.php; see also Chantal Fiola, *Rekindling the Sacred Fire: Métis Ancestry and Anishinaabe Spirituality* (Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2015).
- 4** For more on Indigenous powwow dance, please see: <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/powwow-dances>.
- 5** André Biéler later served as the first director of the art centre.
- 6** Agnes Etherington biographical video (2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqAo8PPSIfE>; Agnes Etherington Art Centre video (2017), <https://vimeo.com/232989669>.
- 7** Emelie Chhangur, ed., *The Films of Bárbara Wagner and Benjamin de Burca*, with texts by Emelie Chhangur, André Lepeki, Hélio Menezes, Evan Moffitt (Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2019).
- 8** Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

Emelie Chhangur is the Director-Curator of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston. This appointment follows a significant, seventeen-year curatorial career at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) in Toronto, where she led the reorientation of the gallery to become a civic, community-facing, ethical space driven by social process and intersectional collaboration, founded the gallery's residency program, curated over 100 exhibitions and special projects, and published twenty books. Chhangur regularly presents her research internationally: *Theoretical Forum*, 11th Havana Biennial (2012); *Envisioning a Practice: International Symposium on Performing Arts Curation* and *Encuentro* hosted by the Hemispheric Institute of the Americas (Montreal, 2014); *Visiting Minds* (Panama, 2013); *Common Ground Convening* (Philadelphia, 2019), the 2020 College Art Association Conference (Chicago), Association of Art Museum Curators (AAMC) Conference (Seattle), and Association of Academic Museums and Galleries (AAMG) Con-

ference (Kansas). Chhangur has participated in a number of artist and curatorial residencies including *Onagawa AIR* and *Kamiyama AIR* (Japan) *Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño* (Colombia), and *FOCUS: Institut Français* (France). In 2019, she won the Ontario Association of Art Galleries' inaugural BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) Change-maker Award, and in 2020 the prestigious Hnatyshyn Foundation Award for Curatorial Excellence.

Jennifer Fisher is a writer and researcher whose work focuses on curatorial studies, contemporary art, performance, feminist epistemology, affect theory, and the aesthetics of the non-visual senses. She is co-founder and joint editor of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies* and has guest edited special issues of: *PUBLIC: "Art and Civic Spectacle"* as well as *Senses and Society: "Sensory Aesthetics."* Her writings have been featured in journals such as *Capacious: Journal of Emerging Affective Inquiry*, *Performance Research*, *n.paradoxa*, *Tessera*, *Art Journal*, and *Canadian Women's Studies*, and in books including *The Ashgate Companion to Paranormal Culture*, *The Senses in Performance*, *Caught in the Act*, and *Foodculture*. Her anthology *Technologies of Intuition* was published by YYZ-BOOKS (2006). She is a founding member of DisplayCult, a collaborative curatorial framework whose exhibitions include *underpressure* (2015), *NIGHTSENSE* (2009), *Odor Limits* (2008), *Do Me!* (2006), *Linda M. Montano: 14 Years of Living Art* (2003), *Museopathy* (2001), *Vital Signs* (2000), and *CounterPoses* (1998). With Helena Reckitt, Jennifer co-edited two special issues of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*: "Museums and Affect" (2015) and "Affect and Relationality" (2016). She is professor of contemporary art and curatorial studies at York University.

Instituting and Organising “From the Pockets”: A Field Report from a Museum in the Making

Husseina Hamza, Joyce Jacca,
Tracey Jarrett, and Janna Graham

We wrote this short reflection on our recent attempts to make a museum—starting from where we are—as International Women’s Week and the Women’s Strike came to a close

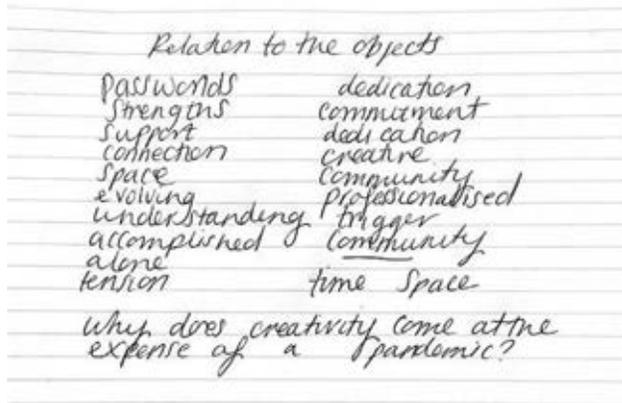
We write “from the pockets.”¹ *Geographical pockets*—a housing estate in Deptford, South London, a food bank, a library, and community centre, what was a junk-filled corner cleaned to make room for ourselves and our communities; *holding pockets*—frayed and threadbare, pockets from which we draw from the modesty of our resources to fill the social gaps, from which we buy the food and drink that bring people together and help us to survive; *pockets in time*, in which we squeeze an extra hour to visit another friend in the hospital, take care of another child, hold another family member, launch another meeting; *invisible pockets*, full to the brim with stories, with organising and survival strategies, with to-do lists, notes of love, spare change, and passionate and deeply unrecognised labour. We also write from *pockets of exhaustion*, from a year of unacknowledged carrying, visiting, feeding, and healing. After a week of reflecting and consciousness-raising with women’s international groups, we finally write from *pockets of joy*, difference, passion, and love, the forces that motivated our ancestors to struggle and us to address the troubled and possible histories of where we are today.

Museum-Making and/as Organising

The Black Lives Matter protests of last summer brought into stark relief the need for very honest conversations about the distance between the rhetoric of change in museums and the actual work of making it. As curator Yesomi Umolu suggests, “If we have now arrived at acknowledging the genealogy of violence and injustice in our institutions, public spaces, and personal lives, then the hard work of the days and months to come is to unlearn the practices and behaviours that have emerged from this condition, and seek to build anew along antiracist and decolonized lines.”²

Museums, she says, “must practice empathy and close the gap between themselves and their communities; they must provide space for conversations on the issues that matter to the lives of their audiences, neighbours, and employees.” Equally, she suggests, they “must be sites of advocacy, not just for the artistic and art-historical traditions that they hold so dear, but for basic rights to life, safety, shelter, well-being, and economic and intellectual sustenance.”³

While she is arguably describing the work of existing museums that must “commit to practices of knowing and care that critically interrogate the fraught history of museums and their contemporary form,” she also talks about “uprooting weak foundations and rebuilding upon new, healthy ones.”⁴



A response to the *Women in Transit* object-based workshop, March 2021, Kate Gillies.

Our modest museum-building project, the Deptford People’s Heritage Museum, started just before these protests. It was not founded on the troubled history of a collection but rather is a collection based in both the troubled and inspiring histories of where we live in Deptford. Initiated by Joyce Jacca and Ken Thomas, the museum begins on the terrain of a conflicted present, in which a multi-national real estate deal has been struck to ‘develop’ the Deptford Docks without meaningful consultation with our community, and another development flagrantly adorns construction hoarding for new unaffordable housing with the name of “Sir Francis Drake.” Our museum started here, as an act of contestation, resistance, and community organising.

But the story of our museum is in fact much longer. Where we are located in the Pepys Resource Centre, on the Pepys Estate, is a stone’s throw from the Deptford Docks, from which notable ships and perpetrators travelled to abduct millions of people into the transatlantic slave trade, extract resources through the exploits of the East India Company, and at which people plotted struggles for freedom. We are one of a group of organisers including Voice for Deptford, Deptford Neighbourhood Association, the Lenox project, and others working to ensure that this troubled history is not papered over by shiny new buildings, cafes, and shops inaccessible and unaccountable to local people.

Our story is also located in the long struggle for the reclamation of Black-led spaces, spaces and histories that, in our neighbourhood, are part of a legacy dispossession, chronic de-funding, non-recognition, a continuation, to our minds, of the more overt racist fire bombings of the 1970s and ‘80s and the violent movement of people and community wealth that enabled the unequal accumulation of property and resources underpinning contemporary Britain. As scholar and Black Lives Matter activist Lisa Robinson said in our recent community gathering, spaces led by communities of colour—and often held up by the practices of African and Caribbean women—are systematically shut down, taken over, and otherwise undermined by the very local Councils who claim to serve them.⁵ Occupying and governing our own spaces is an important act of resistance in the face of the dispossession of the past and the present.

Our Museum is made by people who live in the surrounding area who trace histories and ancestral links to and from Deptford, tell the stories of local struggles for freedom, and plot these histories in relation to contemporary issues facing their community and others around the world. The building in which we are based—the Pepys Resource Centre—has been open to the community for many years. It was, in the 1960s, part of a

thriving social housing estate with communal spaces, courtyards, and parks, backing onto the river Thames. In more recent years, as with the story of many community facilities on housing estates, ideological acts of de-funding instituted by Thatcher’s privatisation and the ongoing stigmatisation of social housing left it in partial use as a storage space and a community library open to the community only ten hours per week. In 2017, a group of women organisers from African, Caribbean, South American, and European backgrounds called We Women, including museum co-founder Joyce Jacca, wanting to reclaim a space for community, removed five vans worth of non-used materials, donating them to the local Deptford market. We Women spent days cleaning up the space and opening it up as a place for community organising and development.

We use the term “community development” here to describe approaches to a long history of grassroots organising practices (which we will have more to say about in a moment) rooted in women’s lives, in antiracism activism, in the anti-oppression pedagogy of Paulo Freire and in pan-Africanist decolonisation, not that of “developing” community for the purposes of “betterment” defined from above by the state, developers, medical or social service authorities.



Welcome Home quilting workshop, a collaboration between Red Ribbon Living Well and Deptford People’s Heritage Museum, October 2021, Photo: Jorella Andrews.

One of the first meetings in the newly founded Pepys Resource Centre took place on International Women’s Day. As Luciana, a member of the We Women group, described in one of our community gatherings, “On the day we opened, we saw the ghosts having a party.”⁶ The ancestors of the struggles of the Docks, and the women who have laboured “in the wake” of the transatlantic slave trade, the ships, the migration of women, and colonial violence as we experience its haunts today were present.⁷ We Women knew already that we needed a place for the ghosts, to honour these ancestors and our conversations with them—the form we have taken for this, perhaps strangely, is a museum.

Three years later, at the onset of the pandemic, in those early days when it seemed our concerns and ways of doing things might shift the world for the better, many of us knew that there was a shortage of food for people in the community. Joyce was making meals and serving them in the Centre, paying for drinks and supplies—again, from her pockets. She asked the Council if there were any resources. They directed her to a community-led food bank, which was looking for space and immediately moved into the Pepys Centre. As people started to gather food on Saturdays, Joyce and Ken, another local community development worker, began to put out objects related to histories of women’s work—including objects passed down from Joyce’s family in Kenya, as well as remnants of the history of enslavement, including a package of Tate and Lyle sugar, placed to draw attention to the history of the nearby Docks—a history that few people who live locally are aware of, even though its legacies are fairly plain to see. Parents and their children started to ask, “What are these objects?”

These Saturday sessions at the food bank began the conversations upon which the museum was built. We asked, how do we connect our own histories to the troubling past of the river that runs outside, to the ghosts of the ships and the docks that are a short walk away? How does being “in the wake” of these histories shape our response to the contemporary violence we continue to face as working-class African and Caribbean women? After a short time, families using the food bank began to bring their own family objects in to engage in this conversation—tooth sticks—toothbrushes used in different parts of Africa, drums, fabrics, pieces of life are now nested amongst tables and computer stations, women’s meetings, and exercise classes that compose the daily life of the Pepys Centre.



Drums in the collection at Deptford Peoples Heritage Museum, 2020, Photo: Joyce Jacca.



Chip on Your Shoulder, community walk, November 2020, Photo: Lily Fonzo.

A local young person, Josh, began to work with Ken to assemble *Chip on Your Shoulder*, an exhibition about the naval dockyard and its intersecting histories of exploitative labour practices (the term “chip on your shoulder” being the name given to workers who literally took wood chips from the dockyard in lieu of payment), and the struggles for freedom plotted in relation to the transatlantic slave trade by communities of colour.

Our emerging process is based on what we describe as the “village ethos,” a way of gathering local people to set collections in motion, become the curators, the exhibitors, and storytellers, and a way of forming collections that function to contest the regular and systematic erasure of our lives. While these terms mimic those used by other museums, the village ethos draws far more from the technologies we have developed as women of colour (using the most inclusive, self-nominating definition and one that both includes but acknowledges the differences in oppression between women from Africa, Caribbean, South Asia, and South America as well as those from trans and other backgrounds). It comes from our background as organisers and the technologies of communal life and struggle passed down in the stories and experiences of village life that we as diasporic women remember in and through our own community work. From this perspective, a collection is not only a series of objects, but a way to learn collectively and to support our local campaigns and struggles.

These are significantly different from mainstream museums’ ideas of outreach or “engagement” in which the Centre, i.e., what is to be engaged with, is almost always defined by the class whose wealth was amassed on the backs of communities of colour—and even more so those of African and Caribbean women. They are also different from the idea of community organisation or development that does not attend to the way that our objects are interwoven into the practices that shape our everyday modes of survival, historically relegated to the private sphere or to no sphere at all. Making a museum from women’s community organising alongside a food bank and self-generated programmes draws from another vocabulary of history-making and objecthood, a different kind instituting and curating, one that is at once set in the very present of the organisation of our lives, but deeply extends into the before of the afterlives of our work.

This definition of what exists in public or in private, what is acknowledged as labour and not, continues to impose blind spots that relegate our kind of work—both in the world of mainstream museology and in the worlds of community development—to “the pockets,” with devastating consequences for our communities.

Municipal Housekeeping

This question also underpins many of the problems of the museum’s ability to move beyond speeches and placations and towards meaningful change discussed by Umolu. Most cultural institutions in Western liberal democracies define themselves around an idea of the public sphere steeped in the white, bourgeois privilege of Jurgen Habermas’s articulation. Museums and galleries are seen as open *to* the public, as staging contemporary culture *for* the public, as taking care of objects in perpetuity for the public *to come*, as platforming opportunity for conversation and debate—even about their own troubling acquisition histories, their links to stolen objects, etc.—*to inform* the public so that it may formulate opinions based on historical foundations. The museum is the point of entry for “general” publics (usually white and middle-class), or a point of “access” for specified publics including disenfranchised communities who are seen to benefit from this access. The publicness of this public relies on its visibility, its desire, and/or ability to engage, watch, consume, to be counted in attendance, to congregate and aggregate around presentations of culture often understood to be both neutral and universal. As Nancy Fraser pointed out in her now historical feminist critique of Jurgen Habermas’s characterisation of the public sphere, the idea that certain sites, like the museum or the gallery today, are designated for public culture, for the visible work of making publics and public opinion, does not account for the myriad histories of subaltern organising by women and others who had no visibility, recognition nor interest in such spaces.⁸ In the case of the museum, this is not necessarily because they/we have been banned, nor because they/we have not had access, and not only because our life conditions do not afford the time or the interest in being in them, but because they are organised around the very relations of power that make visible the culture of the most privileged, without any recognition of the ways in which this privilege shapes the everyday lives of subaltern communities. Heston A Baker Jr reminds us in his argument for the Black public sphere, that the very notion of public that underpins the bourgeois public sphere relies on a propertied definition of “man” that was built on theft from the global majority Black communities and communities of colour who are by definition excluded from it. As Baker further points out, places and processes of publicity built upon the violent expropriation of life and culture cannot provide the neutral frame for negotiation, discussion, or contact without attending to what they have actively participated in and profited from destroying.

Both Fraser and Baker argue for a re-working of the public/private distinction in the conceptualisation of public life, public participation, and the public sphere, to account for the kitchens, basements, quilts, songs, churches, porches, and fields in which the struggles that define the culture of the global majority take place. Their call is not for a collapse of the public / private as we have come to know in neoliberal demands of work, but a recognition that much of the labour of constituting the public sphere has and must, reside in reproductive work.⁹

In museums and galleries, while one can see many objects and experiences of the so-called private sphere on display, there has been little to no recognition of the struggles of this sphere nor those of social reproduction more generally in the way that museum infrastructures are organised. This lack of recognition goes beyond histories of cultural theft and expropriation and underscores the museum’s relation to contem-

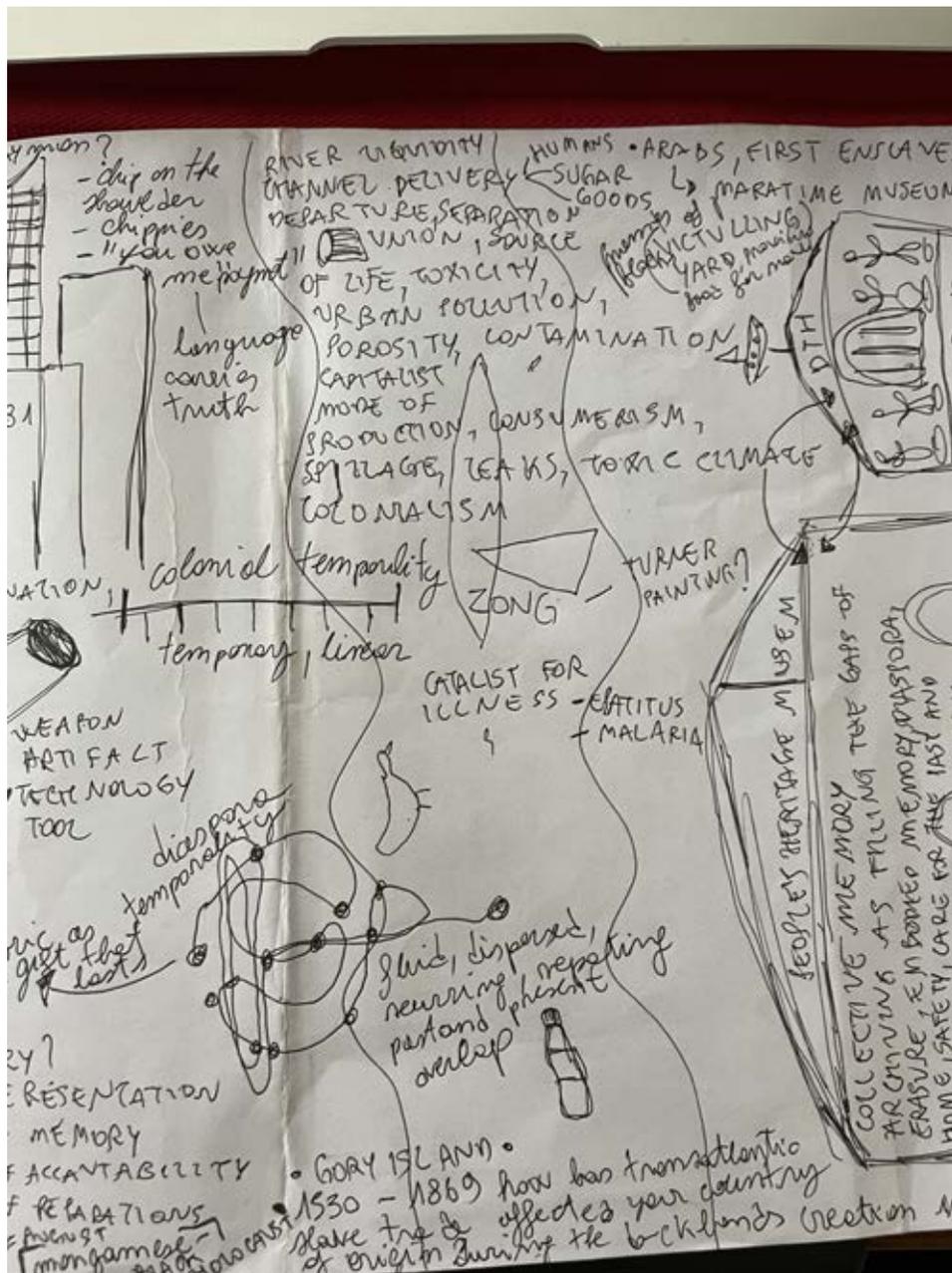
porary communities. Conditions that shape the lives of communities including museum workers, visitors, and neighbours have been routinely ignored in museums and galleries, as have their own labour practices, making them active contributors to the material dispossession of women (who perform the majority of cultural labour on low pay) and communities of colour (often working in the out-sourced and precarious roles like cleaning and catering). Equally, as perpetrators of universalising definitions of culture they have systematically expropriated resources from communities to fund their ever-expanding global gaze. We see this, for example, in the ways in which arts council funding in England in the last thirty years has concentrated itself within larger institutions with a remit for “engagement” at the direct expense of adequate funding for community based cultural projects—perhaps less discernible as such for their integration into practices of everyday life and survival—that serve differentiated cultural needs, including the need to contest the exclusionary policies of the State. This disregard for what has been relegated to the private in favour of a public canvas for directorial, artistic, and patriarchal genius has also produced materially detrimental effects on neighbourhoods by supplying ideas and aesthetic justification (“good culture”) for the destructive processes of speculative capital that regularly result in community displacement and in the privileging of the culture of multinational investment over accountable, collective, and common approaches to community support.

In contemporary society, we can additionally argue—as do Paulo Virno and Isabell Lorey—that while the performance of certain notions of the public continues in the present, the lived distinctions between private and public has in many ways collapsed. This collapse is not, as Fraser and Baker had hoped, a moment in which public culture has widened to encompass localized subaltern sites of production and resistance but rather made so many aspects of life fodder for an ever-churning communicative capital that turns all aspects of private life into work and all corporeal needs into the terrain of speculative finance, the result of which we experience in generalised social affects of panic and precarity.¹⁰ Here, the earlier exclusions of the public sphere are exacerbated rather than ameliorated, and the ways and speed through museums convert vital questions of life into packaged and short-term themes and statements, in accelerated complicity with the forces of capital that routinely unground struggles from everyday conditions and stakes. This was made painfully clear in the endless directorial statements made—and called out for their hypocrisy, short-termism, and disconnection from institutional conditions—in the events following the death of George Floyd last summer.

As Yaiza María Hernández Velázquez points out in her readings of the Santiago Declaration at the International Council of Museums in the 1970s, this does not have to be the history of the museum nor its conception of the public. She proposes the genealogy of the Community Museum—far more prevalent in the Global South and rooted not in notions of the bourgeois public sphere so much as in frameworks of cultural accountability based in local issues—as an alternative to a notion of the public conceived by anointed “leaders” (funded by contemporary financiers) with the power to produce and reproduce dominant and universal aesthetic judgement. Rather than feigning political neutrality, Community Museums, she argues, constitute a radical proposition towards locally embedded praxes that do not separate questions of the aesthetic, of collection or exhibition from questions of the production and reproduction of life but rather constitute a radical museology in the relation between the two.¹¹

Our museum situates itself within this genealogy but also within histories of community organising and development, which, though broadly speaking exist to support

disenfranchised communities, mirror museological dynamics in their conception of what constitute public and private spheres, problems that underpin logics and approaches that currently justify the continuous pattern of under-resourcing and rendering invisible the efforts of women of colour. In a survey of US community organisers in the 1990s, researchers Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker suggested that dominant and masculinised notions of the public sphere underpin many of the most celebrated practices of community organising—those professed by Saul Alinsky and other grassroots and labour organisers who, in their important struggles at the neighbourhood level, nonetheless can replicate the paradigms of oppression experienced by the communities they are fighting for.¹² Like the public sphere of the museum, these practices valorise speech, visibility, and the performance of appointed "organic leaders" in the realm of public debate, a field constituted by competition



Rights of Passage dockland walk outcome, June 2021, Photo: Ginevra Naldini.



Rights of Passage dockland walk led by Jorella Andrews, June 2021, Photo: Jorella Andrews.

between the “haves” and the “have nots.” In their review of the much less visible practices of women of colour and low-income organisers (predominantly by LatinX, African American and Indigenous women), who do not ascribe to models per se, Stall and Stoecker suggest that organising techniques adopt practices of what they call an “expanded private sphere,” moving beyond or in place of the genealogical or contractual relations of motherhood to create communities of care composed by non-biological “other mothers,” “who collectivise, share and mutually valorise responsibilities of social reproduction, in turn making their networks and forms of resistance more sustainable.”¹³ While there is a risk of gender-based and racialised essentialisation in their analysis, Stall and Stoecker are clear that the practices used are not attributed to the gendering of those who perform them per se but to a difference between those praxes of organising that take social reproduction (the labours and practices that produce and reproduce life) as their base from those more focused on the visible performances of leadership and negotiation within existing power relations. Where community organisers based in notions of the (bourgeois) public sphere often worked away from and at the cost of relations of care and domestic duties in their lives, they

observed, and understood the neighbourhood as the space in which power might be gained through competitive negotiations amongst each other and with those shaping local power relations, organisers basing their work on social reproduction stage community resistance through acts of “municipal housekeeping,” serving to reclaim aspects of life from vectors of control—whether these be at the level of the police, corporations, developers or local councils or debt-makers—through direct engagement with the community’s needs for survival. For example, Chicana women, in the neighbourhood of Pico Aliso in Los Angeles, recently described their own practices of “municipal housekeeping” in delivering food to local drug dealers who, in turn, demonstrated respect for the area, as an alternative to narratives of “necessary policing” that Councils, real estate developers, and neighbourhood beautiful groups perpetuate in relation to street crime as a form of resistance to gentrification processes.¹⁴ This is not to say that ‘municipal housekeepers’ do not produce analysis or antagonism, as in Stall and Stoecker’s assessment, like the Breakfast Clubs of the Black Panther movement, the threat they pose is, in the long term, arguably more antagonistic and disruptive to the social order.

Stall and Stoecker point out that, while Alinsky and other “public sphere” focused models of community organising work to cultivate leaders (much like in museums and galleries) as spokespeople in the movement towards achievable goals or “wins,” this tendency often results in such leaders’ co-optation into compromised political positions. Organising practices based in social production emerging from women of colour organising practices are oriented around “centre women” or “bridge leaders,” who use “existing networks to develop social groups that generate community consciousness” and to create an ongoing context for engaging with social movements and issues as they arise. In our current struggles against speculative developers, neoliberal and unaccountable Councils, extractive cultural practices, and predatory policing, we do not necessarily have the luxury of choosing one of these organising models over the other. It is, however, important, however, to mark their differences, particularly as we in this neighbourhood who have organised through the techniques of municipal housekeeping are routinely drawn upon for ideas and expertise while at the same time rendered invisible, overlooked, de-funded, and pushed out. In Deptford, it is routinely the case that efforts we make to engage in representative dialogue or input are almost always co-opted, our creativity and ideas feeding into Council bids like that of the London Borough of Culture, with little accountability or material resources ever significantly manifesting themselves in our realities.

What is it to make a museum out of acts of municipal housekeeping, out of the webs of resistance we bridge as women organisers rooted in very basics means of survival—food, movement, health, social support, communal struggle, and the ongoing conversation care for and encounter with ghosts? The making of a museum by us is part of the fight for recognition of these practices in the face of a multinational development, a Council who does hear us and community development paradigms that are more attuned to the presentational bureaucracies of local funding and hierarchy than they are to accountable relations to our community as a common struggle. The building of the museum is about galvanising community power, to advocate and re-constitute our lives based in a more equal distribution. The museum then is also a demand for the resources to which we are entitled as “bridges” in and between our communities.

We Carry A Lot

It is important to suggest that—while organising from the pockets poses important questions to the current organisation of culture—it is not a utopian enterprise. It does not afford us the means for adequate recognition or survival. Nonetheless, in the practices and technologies of care we make there lies a blueprint for a more loving, passionate, and sustainable life, albeit one that is barely survivable at present. Our bodies and energies bridge so many gaps. We put everything on the line in the effort to support people. We carry a lot. We are driven by the passion and love we have with our community. No one is recognising this. We spend our own money, of which we have little, we escort our people to the doctor, we risk our lives taking them to the hospital, we make and buy drinks and food to make the groups active, we take care of children on the street, not only our own. We carry a lot. As we do this, as we regularly ask for help and support with no result. We watch as those with degrees who have not done this work of community organising and have little relation to the community get the grants, are celebrated, and made increasingly visible. All the while, we are the ones keeping people alive and putting ourselves and needs aside. We make the heart. We carry a lot.

This is why our conversation with the legacy of the Docks—the ghosts—is so important to our understanding of the present. As Gargi Bhattacharyya suggests in her writings on racial capitalism, "There are new and unpredictable modes of dispossession to be understood alongside the centuries old carnage that moistens the earth beneath our feet."¹⁵

In her opening to the book, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism*, she described racial capitalism as follows:

Imagine a house with many storeys—an attic and a cellar, several annexes, that have no direct connections, main rooms filled with comfort and a maze of un-mappable corridors leading to all sorts of barely remembered wings, snugs and the occasional route outside to an isolated out-house. But mostly their movements are shaped by the place in which they find themselves and who they see and who they can be, delimited by the strange geography of the house.¹⁶

We live in this house, the one of our local geography, in which we find ourselves regularly limited for options, where we have to fight for every aspect of survival and where our work is not recognised. One aspect of racial capitalism is the processes that grants "differential treatment to workers and almost workers and non-workers and the social relations that flow from these differentiations."

As Bhattacharyya says, "to understand racial capitalism" we must re-visit our understanding of the value of work and the conception of some activity as non-work. The idea of social reproduction, of municipal housekeeping allows us to understand the "radicalised differentiation of populations as enabling forms of supplementarity beyond households."¹⁷

To assert a museum that is based amongst our acts of municipal housekeeping is then a demand for the recognition of our labour, a desire for this to be placed at the more visible centre of what is valued in our culture, to have our efforts recognised within the mechanisms of value in our society. To do this would be to undermine or at the very least highlight the logics of racial capitalism that Bhattacharyya describes, a resourced and recognised version of what we do from our pockets.

Afterlives

Our museum exists in the afterlives of the people and struggles that have come before us and, we hope, it pre-figures those of the people who are to come. This past International Women’s Week, a year after we began to make our village museum, we have listened to women from Deptford and around the world who have brought and discussed the objects around which they have survived and supported others through the pandemic. Our ears are full of their acts and our own as we find our way to articulate these stories—our modes of survival and organising—in ways that include display, education, collective decision-making, and other meaningful social actions. In the local assemblies and gatherings that are to come, our question will be this question—how can the technologies, processes, and stories of our survival prove to contest the logics that are re-shaping our neighbourhood, literally just outside the door, logics that render us invisible, unviable, and unreasonable? How do we start a museum from this place, where we are, from pockets that are resistant, threadbare, and without end?¹⁸

Notes

1 This article was written through a series of conversation amongst ourselves in February and March 2021. The idea of the “pockets” emerged from these conversations and our experiences as community-based curators and organisers.

2 Yesomi Umolu, “Opinion: On the Limits of Care and Knowledge: 15 Points Museums Must Understand to Dismantle Structural Injustice,” *Artnet*, June 25, 2020, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/limits-of-care-and-knowledge-yesomi-umolu-op-ed-1889739?fbclid=IwAR17u9IHj5tOnbJHloDBQAoNVSJymE080zzg-HTIKDIHdCC-vtbAgaGQiaE#.XvXcpF-DohWY.facebook>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 This is the subject of Lisa’s PhD dissertation at Nottingham University and something she contributed to our public conversation “*What could a people’s museum be?*” in February 2021.

6 Luciana relayed this history during the Zoom conversation, “What could a People’s Museum Be?” Community Gathering, February 2021.

7 *In the Wake* is the title of Christina Sharpe’s 2016 book in which she describes the work of trailing behind the ships, keeping watch with the dead, and how black lives are swept up by the afterlives of slavery. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

8 Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

9 “Critical Memory and the Black Public Sphere,” in *The Black Public Sphere*, ed. Black Public Sphere Collective (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

10 Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001); Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious* (London: Verso Books, 2015).

11 Yaiza María Hernández Velázquez, “Imagining Curatorial Practice After 1972,” in *Curating After the Global: Roadmaps for the Present* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2019).

12 Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, “Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment,” *Gender and Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 729-56.

Thank you to Valeria Graziano for this important reference.

13 Ibid.

14 Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, “The Women of Pico Aliso: 20 Years of Housing Activism,” accessed 1 April 2021, <http://alianzacontraartwashing.org/en/coalition-statements/the-women-of-pico-aliso-20-years-of-housing-activism/>.

15 Gargi Bhattacharyya, *Rethinking Racial Capitalism: Questions of Reproduction and Survival* (London: Romwan & Littlefield, 2018), x.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., ix.

18 Women in Transition took place during International Women's Week in 2021. Events were facilitated by us and the second-year students of the BA Curating programme, Shiori Adachi, Kate Gillies, and Eve-Dawn Speight, using an object-based list-making methodology developed by Dr Jorella Andrews, with whom we are grateful to have worked.

<https://deptfordpeoplesheritagemuseum.cargo.site/Women-in-Transition>

Husseina Hamza is founder and chair of Red Ribbon Living Well, supporting women affected and living with HIV. She is a Community Advocate and Peer Mentor. She is a volunteer at the Deptford People's Heritage Museum.

Joyce Jacca is a community-development worker, former ward Councilor, founder of Future of Women International (FOWI), member of We Women, and co-founder of the Deptford People's Heritage Museum.

Tracey Jarrett / Sister Jahsunray is a Pan-Africanist community development worker, CEO of Shine Your Light, Galaxy Radio show host, and podcaster. She creates and delivers bespoke training on various subjects, including race, gender, mental health, and older people matters. She is a volunteer at the Deptford People's Heritage Museum.

Janna Graham is a curator, researcher, and organiser focussed on processes of institutional analysis and change and struggles for social justice. She is Programme Leader of the BA Curating at Goldsmiths, University of London, a member of sound collective Ultra-red, and a volunteer at the Deptford People's Heritage Museum.

cultivating la Sala: instituting from the kitchen table

la Sala (Alba Colomo & Lucy Lopez)

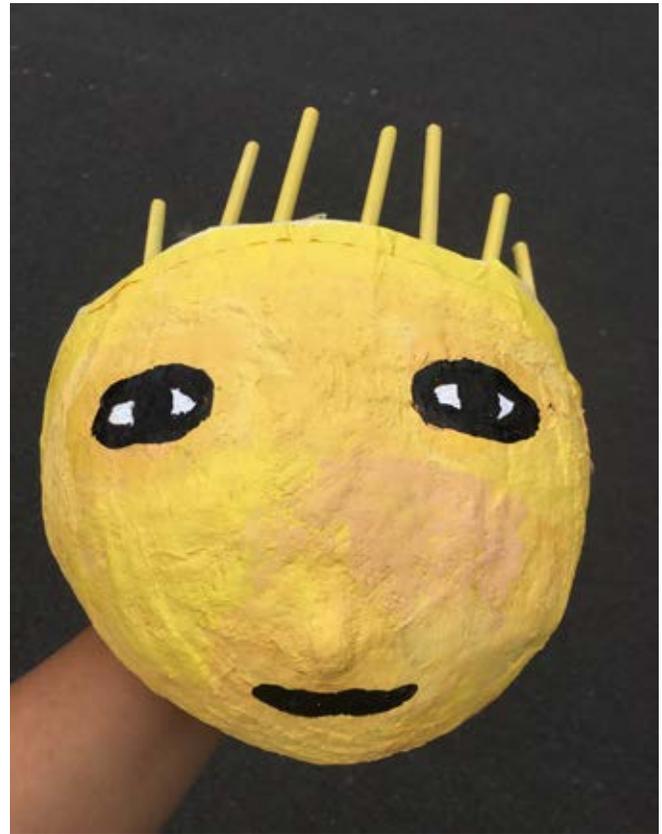
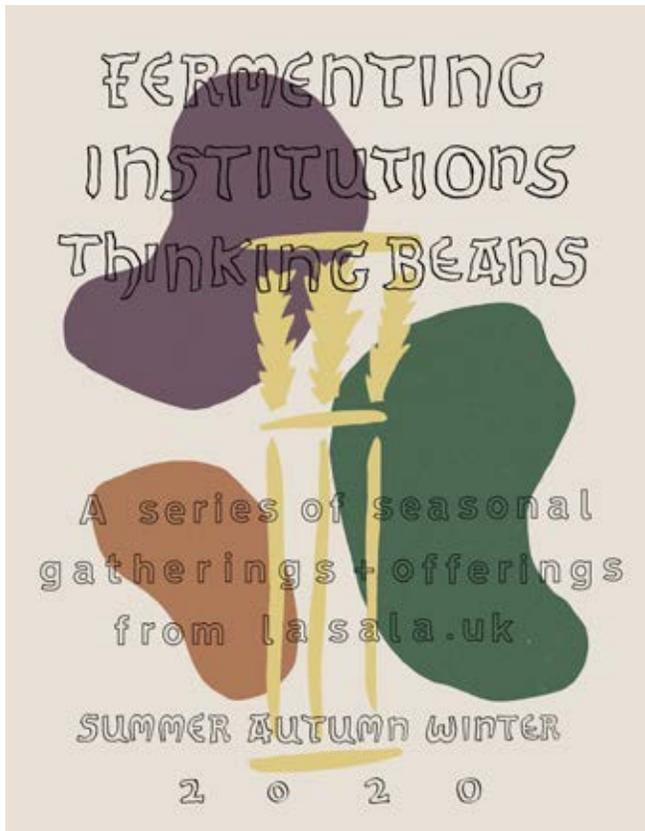
Whilst the framing of this journal issue invites us to think within, not without, the institution—asking us *not* to abandon it—we'd like to start from the provocation of abandoning the institution proper. What is possible in its wake? We see feminism(s) as an instituent practice: adaptive, porous, capable of making many worlds. Whilst many formal institutions speak of feminist practice and programme around it, their foundation as colonial and patriarchal infrastructures of the state is hard to dismantle, and we've witnessed too many peers and colleagues for whom attempting to change things from the inside led to burnout and other long-term mental health concerns. It's not that institutional forms and infrastructures cannot be feminist (or equitable, sustainable, anti-racist), but that the ones we have are not fit for purpose. Rather than instituting feminism—fixing it in time, formalising it—we'd rather speak of feminist instituting as an ongoing praxis, something to live by and build with.

la Sala

We founded la Sala in late 2019: a small space in a market in Nottingham with a kitchen and a table, and a growing space. *Sala* in Spanish literally means “room where life takes place”, and this is precisely what we wanted to generate: a room where life is cultivated and fostered, where we can spend time together talking, cooking, and plotting, inviting others to join us. Thinking-with the feminist idea of the urgency to put life at the centre, we wanted to institute something that not only reflects and theorises about this principal, but also embodies it. After a decade of curating projects and working in various institutions internationally, we came together to start a space that wouldn't only focus on the representational aspects of art and discourse but also on how to put into practice the values and theories that we were advocating for. To begin to build an organisation, an organism, that would truly centre the act of living, and living well.

How do we build a slow, careful institution? Can an institution foster biodiversity? Is it possible to establish a more sustainable practice and perpetuate it in the long term? How can we operate in a way that is generative rather than extractive, both to the planet and ourselves? These are some of the initial questions we were concerned with when starting la Sala. We believe, as Silvia Federici often says, that significant transformation only happens in collective spaces where support infrastructures are generated.¹ We, too, felt an urgency to have a place to gather, a base from which to build community when so much is being cut and dismantled. la Sala was built on these premises.





Throughout 2020, we took the process of fermenting as a methodology, exploring the time, care, and conditions needed to grow an ecofeminist art institution—one which is generative, sensitive to locality, and responsive to conditions of planetary and human exhaustion. Fermenting was a starting point to think through the cultural institution of the present. What can contemporary art learn from food growers, producers, and collectives? How do we value this work of sustaining and sustainability—in relation to reproductive labour and care work?

Our first year of programming, *Fermenting Institutions, Thinking Beans*, has consisted of conversations, growing food, looking after the soil, and cohabiting with other species and multitudes. We've begun to work with artists in small ways—Sofia Niazi, Inês Neto dos Santos, Rosalie Schweiker, Calipso Press, and Mercedes Villalba—initiating projects that will continue and evolve through time. Primarily, we've taken slow steps towards thinking about how we might work together. In order to begin well, and so as not to replicate the structures and conditions of the institutions we've encountered, we drafted a working code of practice at the start of our collaboration. This will shift as we do, but it offers some coordinates to hold ourselves to. The rest of this text will be

structured around a few of these statements, as some short suggestions for feminist instituting in practice.

**our internal workings are as important as our public programmes
we consider care work as work**

In the current climate(s), we are exhausted. There is no lack of art which speaks to the urgent issues of our time: climate, conflict, rising fascism, the need to find ways to live and work towards sustainable futures. But whilst this exists in the realm of programming, we are neglecting to address the position from which we speak as art workers. We are dreaming of an institution that applies the same thought, the same rigour and criticality, with which it forms its artistic programmes, to the organisation itself: its modes of instituting, its management, its working culture, with a view to modelling the art institution as a figure of that which we would wish to institute in the world.

In 2017, Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez made a case “For Slow Institutions,” with a call to curators to “imagine new ecologies of care as a continuous practice of support [...] to radically open up our institutional borders and show how these work—or don't—in order to render

our organizations palpable, audible, sentient, soft, porous, and above all, decolonial and anti-patriarchal.”² In thinking how a slow institution could be built in real terms, these *ecologies of care* could be understood two-fold: a practice of care internal to the organisation (which takes a feminist approach to work, reconsidering structure and policy); and quite directly, a practice of care for our place in the wider ecology.

Over the past year, care has come to the forefront; as Johanna Hedva writes, this is “what happens when care insists on itself [...] when it takes up space and money and labour and energy.”³ Almost every exhibition or programme is talking about care, but still not engaging with its reality and the many violences it covers, from the poor treatment of domestic and other care workers, the discrepancies in how care is provided to different communities, to the structural inequalities within our institutions. It’s hard to hold onto a word that is often used to obfuscate realities. But care we must. We hold close the definition of care written by Joan Tronto and Bernice Fisher, as “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.”⁴ In this sense, it’s vital, and a feminist praxis: working to maintain, continue, and repair our world.

our approach to feminism is also ecological and intersectional
we commit to being sustainable, to the planet and also to our bodies

For us there’s no real feminism that isn’t also ecological and intersectional. We hope that this will become ingrained in the very concept of feminist praxis, but for now it needs to be stated continuously, as a form of commitment. As well as being anti-racist, inclusive, and accessible this also means the inclusion of all who identify as women.

We work from a position of ecofeminism—foregrounding practices of care in, as Maria Puig de la Bellacasa writes, more than human worlds.⁵ Ecofeminism defends interdependence between all beings on the planet, including water, air, and soil. We can’t survive without these relationships, and we are fully dependent on them: we are vulnerable beings with finite bodies, and we need other humans and more-than-human beings to live. Historically, capitalism has imposed a linear productive system that defends the infinite exploitation of the material resources of the planet, including human bodies.

As well as the space, we also have an allotment, a rented plot of land on which we cultivate and grow. This relationship is crucial for us, as it reminds us of the interde-



pendence that forms the ecosystem where we live (and work). Thinking of how to define or better understand this holistic approach to practice, we started looking at permaculture as a methodology; looking at different ways to create a system that connects and includes both sides of la Sala. We look at the three main ethical principles of permaculture as a basis for our thinking and doing, more urgent than ever in a time of climate emergency. These are: earth care, people care, and fair share. These concerns feed into every aspect of our work, from transparent budgeting and fair pay systems, to seasonal programming and taking care of the soil, to building an organisation that is safe, accessible, and supportive.

Whilst sustainability has become something of a marketised term, to us it has strength in its multiple meanings: how can the institution sustain itself and its workers, whilst at the same time sustaining its environment, with a net positive ecological impact? An institution is an ecosystem, “a community of living organisms in conjunction with the nonliving components of their environment, interacting as a system.”⁶ From maintenance staff to administrative protocols, to the building itself. In order for this to be sustainable, it needs to ensure that all capacities and needs are balanced and cared for, acknowledging interdependence between all within it.



we work around the kitchen table

Kitchens are one of the main centres where reproductive labour takes place: a space from which we sustain and perpetuate life. They have historically been a space of struggle for feminist movements, as they symbolise both inequality and invisible exploitation in relation to the feminisation of care and reproductive labour. As Silvia Federici says, “The kitchen is the beginning of the assembly line,”⁷ as the work it holds is essential for the perpetuation and functioning of the capitalist system. The kitchen table is at the heart of la Sala, and it’s where most things happen. We wanted to reclaim the kitchen table in all its complexity. At the table, life is sustained and cared for, but it can also be a space to be *unproductive*, a space for assembly, and a symbol of feminist resistance.

We’ve both independently worked on projects which brought kitchens into art organisations, whether for programming around, or as a resource for staff who were missing a staff room.⁸ The kitchen is all of these things, a space for work and for ideas, a space for rest and for shared experiences. It’s often where the invisible work of preparing and hosting happens, and we prefer when this is visible, noisy, and shared among all. It connects us, through food, to our growing practice. Whilst we are continually learning what it means to care for one another as co-workers, we both care naturally in the kitchen, with slow cooked beans and peas or bread and sweet things.



It also shapes how we welcome people, offering something familiar. We always liked the idea that when you come to la Sala you're immediately part of it, cooking or fermenting with us. Thinking of this as a methodological approach, we always reference our friends at El Mato Tinto permaculture farm in Tenerife. They begin each meeting on the farm with physical contact with the soil. They call it *toma de tierra*, which means "earthing or grounding" and is literally to come into contact with the ground by touching, stirring, appreciating the soil. To centre our work at the table is always to make room for work to be interrupted. This kind of practice helps us to centre slowness (against the pull of hyperproductivity). Straight away, things get *unprofessional*—which is exactly how we want to be working.

**we will always be transparent about budgets
we will always be open to non-monetary forms
of exchange and of value**

We believe that publicly (and privately) funded institutions should be transparent about the ways they make and spend money. This serves both to open up the institution (making its internal functions and infrastructure more visible) and to allow staff to understand how and why monetary decisions are made. It means that salary discrepancies cannot be hidden, and staff at all levels can more readily understand what's possible. There's a lot of work to be done to find useful and clear ways to share this information. Whilst la Sala is small, we believe it's important for us, too, to be transparent about this kind of information, and we've made a commitment to do so once we are in receipt of public funding—but we're still learning how best to do so.

We make sure to offer non-monetary forms of exchange, whilst we're searching for a truly functioning circular economy, one that eliminates waste and creates a closed-loop system. In order to build a regenerative approach (in opposition to the linear economy system), it's imperative to use all of our existing resources—so many of these are not monetary.

In being transparent about finances, and in aiming to make a small project like la Sala sustainable, it's perhaps also useful to address the discrepancies in pay which we encounter. To navigate an unpaid invitation like this, for example, from a project we are happy to support, we have made use of fragments of writing from existing texts we've co-authored (including the essay "Institutions as Ecosystems," published in *Who's Art For? Art Workers Against Exploitation* (Milan: postmedia books, 2019)) in a new framework and with added content. We always

aim to be open about money, to say no when we can't agree in good conscience, and to find strategies which value our own and others' time.

Finally, ***we will always be responsive, and will be formed by those who become part of la sala la sala is always in reference to others, and we thank those who have laid the groundwork.***

Notes

- 1 Silvia Federici, Keynote Talk at Nottingham Contemporary, UK, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9fzdK_EoGk&ab_channel=NottinghamContemporary.
- 2 Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "For Slow Institutions," *e-flux* 85 (October 2017). Available at: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155520/for-slow-institutions/>.
- 3 Johanna Hedva, "Get Well Soon!" (2020), <https://getwellsoon.labr.io/>.
- 4 Bernice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Care," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990).
- 5 Maria Puig de la Bella Casa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
- 6 Rudolf Steiner, *Agriculture: Spiritual Foundations for the Renewal of Agriculture* (Kimberton, PA: Biodynamic Association, 1993).
- 7 Silvia Federici, Interview by Manel Ros, 12 November 2012, <https://rebellion.org/la-cadena-de-montaje-empieza-en-la-cocina-en-el-lavabo-en-nuestros-cuerpos-2/>.
- 8 *Ways of Learning*, Grand Union & BALTIC 2018-9, and *Building as Body* with Manual Labours, Nottingham Contemporary, 2017-8.

Written by **Alba Colomo** and **Lucy Lopez**, who initiated la Sala together in late 2019. Alba Colomo is a cultural worker currently researching the potential of permaculture as a methodology for curatorial practice and art institutions. Lucy Lopez is a curator and writer. She is currently writing up her PhD, *Instituting with Care*, and editing a book of the same title.

Digging Deep: Leadership, Learning, and Endurance. A Conversation between Nandita Gandhi, Althea Greenan, Merete Ipsen, and Adele Patrick

Adele Patrick

What is Feminist Leadership? What constitutes a feminist cultural organisation? I have been asking myself these questions over the past three decades as a co-founder of Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) and more recently using them as a focus for research.¹

Whilst mindful of the complexity, not to say anxiety, around the combined terms "feminist" and "leadership," I am committed to the ways that dialogistic, creative, intersectional approaches rooted in the core values of feminism (as these have been developed by those most acutely impacted by discrimination and marginalisation) may now provide pathways and blueprints for new and existing cultural institutions. The retraction of support for cultural initiatives and resources, polarisation around issues of access, and the deepening of inequalities and marginalisation have thrown up further urgent questions concerning the fitness of established and emerging organisations to deliver for communities in relevant, impactful, and sustainable ways. I believe that feminism is well placed to build and sustain resources that can ameliorate the impact of Austerity, Covid Times, Climate Emergency, and Globalisation.²

Any claims to "Build Back Better" or create a "New Normal" (including in the cultural sector) must involve deep structural changes rooted in equalities and a simultaneous examination of the history of feminist organising in both wider politics and in the creation of cultural organisations rooted in equalities agendas. A reflection on the project of feminist organising and leadership globally is timely in this "resetting" and paradigm-shifting period. This is a critical moment for mainstream and fledgling (counter)cultural and "undercommons" projects to learn from past decades of (successful and failed) feminist organising, especially feminist organisational approaches that demonstrate ways of adapting, innovating, and enduring.³ As many more cultural institutions face existential challenges, there is an urgency in sharing experiences of forms of

organisational sustainability, modes of resilience defined and modelled in the organisational histories, institutional knowledges, and the methods of feminist leaders who have centred inclusivity.⁴

As the cultural sector responds to critiques around ownership, representation, power, and relevance (questions that have been at the forefront of feminist theory and practice) and encounters escalating demands to abolish, "de-tox," and re-structure around equalities (but where paradoxically "widened access" and human rights-based agendas are increasingly under threat or corporatised), what can be learnt from experiments in feminist organising in global contexts?

As GWL approaches its 30th anniversary in September 2021, I was keen to speak with co-founders and leaders of feminist cultural organisations who had been developing projects for three decades or more.⁵ In two interview sessions, I spoke to Nandita Gandhi, co-founder and co-director of Akshara, Mumbai; Merete Ipsen, the former director and co-founder of Kvindemuuset (now Køn), Aarhus; and Althea Greenan, curator of the Women's Art Library (WAL), London. The following extracts capture thoughts on professionalisation, the weight of feminist leadership, the process of (co) founding and leaving organisations and, critically, notions of endurance.⁶

Characteristics of feminist cultural institutions such as Bildweschel, a multifaceted women's video collection that was a key model for GWL,⁷ or the four organisations that are the focus of this conversation, are how they are unfettered by normative categorisations (Gallery, Museum, Educational Institution, Archive...) being wilfully hybrid in their operations, programming, and modes of "consumption," "leadership," and "participation" and where their practices progressively shift over time, principally in response to equalities agendas. A common commitment is to the creation of place in

strikingly distinct ways (including re/making space by users/creatives) in resistance to the tendency towards homogeneity and siloed “experiences” in mainstream cultural resources. In the context of GWL, this means that visitors may arrive for literacy or ESOL learning and find themselves encountering contemporary artworks as they pass through a space not designated as a “zone for art” and where artists and visitors have inserted works and objects from their own lives into the fabric of the building over time. The term Library was deliberately chosen in the case of GWL as, arguably, the most accessible of cultural resources. Such a library signposts a safe, free, comfortable, welcoming but challenging space, where art in all forms is made and shared. It offers a locus for chance encounters with others, where friendships are forged in a context replete with inspiring texts, sounds, and visual material (all donated and therefore collectively “curated”) and where duration and frequency of visits can be hugely varied and self-determined. In each of the instances foregrounded here, the idiosyncratic, hybrid and category-defying nature of organisations and their dialogistic cultures illustrate the capacity of feminist organisations to expand the limits of traditional institutions. For example, looking beyond the attention economies associated with curating in the white cube to create environments where the integration of learning and accessible collections are core rather than an ‘add on,’ and outside the hermetic consumption of selected texts in mainstream and academic libraries.

Propagating and Founding Women’s Cultural Resources

Nandita Gandhi: I would describe Akshara as a Social Movement Organisation.⁸ As individuals, we were part of the third phase of the Indian Women’s Movement.⁹

In the initial phases of the Movement, we found that there was a dearth of information. In India, women’s information was totally side-lined; we didn’t even have sex-wise break-up of data emerging from the government. That was an area which we wanted to concentrate on—that was the beginning of Akshara.¹⁰ At the same time, there was a convergence of the Women’s Studies Movement and the Women’s Movement. We got a lot of help from our friends abroad, who gave us books of various sorts.¹¹ That’s how we actually picked up feminist theory, from books and chapters that were typed out and circulated, and we had our little study groups for discussion. We were already in collectives, in



fig. 1. *Nandita Gandhi in Akshara*, 1991. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of Nandita Gandhi.

women’s groups that were taking up political issues, protesting around violence against women, and then dowry, sex selection, and rape in India. We did not set up Akshara as a collective. Collectives existed within the Women’s Movement which were autonomous and formed another structure which bound us to follow state rules and regulations. But what we did was, we sort of tweaked. We didn’t want Akshara to be a normal [state-sanctioned] organisation, like any other; we wanted it to be a feminist one. We set it up as a formal organisation, but we worked as an informal one.¹²

Adele Patrick: So, a form of activist tweaking took place. This concept is evocative of GWL’s origin story, assessing what is possible to do to survive, and the complexity of the ways that women’s organisations are prevented from enduring, exploring how things need to be structured to thrive now and in the longer term. Nandita, when I first heard you speak about Akshara at the Know How conference in 1994, it struck me that there were differences (geographic and cultural) but huge similarities in the challenges we were addressing in operations, engagement, and structure.¹³ When you showed slides of Akshara’s physical space, it looked so much like GWL, and I remember the powerful impression I gained at that gathering of feminists from around the world, creating new institutions with so much to learn from each other. In the meantime, Althea, in 1994, WASL/WAL was already well established?

Althea Greenan: Yes, my personal introduction to the collection and working in what was then The Women Artists Slide Library was only a few years earlier, in 1989, and it was already an independent educational charity. It felt like an established project by the time I got there.¹⁴ I came in as a volunteer and was very much in

awe of the others there and of the whole set-up. I was learning everything, including what feminist work looks like. I don't feel like I've shifted all that much from that position since then. Even though I have become identified with the WASL in a certain way, I'm simply the last pair of hands that was holding what might have been considered the original project before the collection was gifted to Goldsmiths. So, I feel as if I'm maintaining that original *raison d'être* of promoting women's art practice by negotiating being in an academic library. I always describe arriving in a library as a culture shock because I am still finding myself in a formal structure, but wanting to maintain that informal feminist way of working. The initial group of women who founded the WASL shifted from being a collective to formalise the organisation in order to access funding, although artists wanted to maintain that ideal of collective thinking and working. So, there's a tension that underpins the history of the organisation that gets played out in the magazine published by the Library.¹⁵ In retrospect, I wish that there had been an earlier recognition—as in your organisation Nandita—of the benefit of maintaining some kind of informality and resist that mindset of “we can't survive unless” we became kind of brutal with our expectations from people. There was this incredible anxiety about being professional, and I think that wasn't a pleasant experience for some who worked in the library.¹⁶

Merete Ipsen: For me, the foundation of and ongoing relationship with Kvindemuseet was very personal. When we started the Women's Museum, it was like a grassroots movement. We had had the women's movement in the '70s. I was really young then, I was not an activist, but I was interested to witness it.¹⁷ The idea of creating a women's museum grew from this thinking, amongst a group of around twelve or fifteen women. We talked about how we could create it as a meeting place for women, a place where we could share and show research through artefacts, through documentation, and in exhibitions, to create a new scene. Subsequently, we made a Women's Museum Association. Around 100 women and one man who said yes to making an association with two propositions: one was to create a women's museum, a professional women's museum. The second, to create jobs for women. We initiated projects using oral history, which was a perfect way to collect information about women's lives.¹⁸ As a psychology student, it was very important for me to look at everyday life from a sort of Freudian-Marxist perspective—where a Freudian interpretation of people's feelings was merged with a material approach in

studying a range of ways of living and of thinking. Then we created the first jobs. We hired some of ourselves, to conduct research, alongside other leading professionals, and we employed young women who had never been to university. Some had never had more than ordinary elementary school education. We asked them to be part of a project where we, together, went out and did interviews and used oral history methodologies. We worked together and trained unemployed women, and they taught us to ask questions about the “dark side of life,” which we, as employed and successful students, hadn't experienced. This, working across class and educational experience, was one of the very important things about creating the Women's Museum. Over the years when it was developing, all levels of women were active in the Museum. Working in a non-hierarchical way was also important, it was also a challenge.

Collectives and Hierarchies, Pragmatism and Idealism in the Forging of Feminist Institutions

NG: Collectives were looked at in quite an idealistic way—a group of people all equal working together; these were very utopian ideas. But how much can you really implement these ideals? In my view, a collective survives when people have a very similar nature, education, age, similar characteristics, ways of thinking, and ideological leanings. But if there are differences, like a huge age difference, for example, or experiential differences, then that collective becomes shaky, and internal hierarchy surfaces. So, it is better to be upfront and say, “Okay, we're going to have a hierarchy. And we're going to have it be as democratic as possible.” And that's what we did at Akshara.

AP: This tension, of holding both idealism and pragmatism, is something I have been actively researching over the last couple of years.¹⁹ I am more sanguine now about the limits of utopian thinking. Feminist leadership seems more often about the weight of trying to keep organisations going that are under financial and other pressures whilst simultaneously trying to address massive structural inequalities.²⁰

You used the term “professionalism” earlier, Merete, and it strikes me that there is tension still in feminist politics around the institutions that we build as feminists, whether they are at risk from professionalisation, institutionalisation, or academisation.²¹ I wondered what you felt about this term, “institution,” to describe the work that you were doing at Kvindemuseet?

MI: I think it is very, very important to have feminist institutions, to have places where culture is turned upside down. Ordinary museums and institutions are still men's museums and male-dominated institutions, even if they have a female director. It is a question about cultural history. It is a form of social radicality, which shows the context, examines gender and suppression, which looks at history from a women-centred perspective.

AP: The work of feminist institutions' (co)founders such as yourselves indubitably reflects endurance. The continuum of our collective history of work addressing intersectional and structural inequalities, whether the impact of colonial rule, advocating for human rights, addressing sexism in all its forms, or how things like Dewey²² have determined our world, all constitute a critical counterculture. We've also been experimenting with feminist operations, organisational structures, and systems of working.²³ Happily, we are witnessing an efflorescence of feminism enabling us, through our own reflections as we hit milestones and through the eyes of young people, to measure the impact we have had. Picking up on your question of institutionalisation, Nandita, a topic we have been reflecting on at GWL is: should we embrace the idea of being an institution? Should we not claim our being that, for Glasgow, for Scotland? I have shifted my thinking of GWL as a form of "feminist undercommons" to feeling more assertive about positing GWL as a significant cultural organisation, worthy of the levels of support and recognition accessed by mainstream organisations. We are an independent body with our own ethos and values, exploring aspects of feminist professionalism and activism. I am confident we are not acculturated into the mainstream; we retain the power to shift the dial on injustice and inequality.

NG: So, you're asking, is it wise or is it inherent for small organisations to then institutionalise and/or become part of institutions, or become an institution? Or do we stay separate and do our own little thing all the time? That's a very easy way of looking at it. Usually what happens is that you are up against an institution, you try to impact it; in our case, we were developing and sharing alternative women's or feminist information. But as and when the mainstream accepts that, then what do we do? Then it is our responsibility to shift. We allow our radical thinking to be institutionalised, and we shift to other areas which need attention. Akshara had the first collection of feminist books, theoretical books, in the city. Even the libraries hadn't got them, and the Women's Studies Movement hadn't got them. We had sort of trained ourselves; we sat and read day in

and day out. We trained ourselves into basic feminist theory. What is patriarchy? Is it a problem using that term? We read French Feminism, British Feminism, and whatever was available in English. There was a lot of fantastic literature coming out in Latin America, but we could not access it as there were no translations. Once the academic libraries got feminist literature and books, we were irrelevant, right? Students went to their college libraries and stopped coming to Akshara. The Internet came, and suddenly everything was on the Net. Why should they come to our little room and use us as a reference library? That was the time when we had to shift. We were happy that feminist literature and teaching were institutionalised and that way they would reach generations of learners. Our role now was to be a watchdog. We shifted to taking feminist theory to groups of young people through workshops and programmes and public campaigns.

Making, Maintaining and Modifying Spaces and Places, in Real Life and Online

AP: Althea, could you talk about the WAL collection's value for younger people hungry for a better understanding of what histories are, its significance to material culture linked to notions of embodiment?

AG: For students of feminism, there are many more readings available including access to journals if you are part of an institution; it's fantastic what an electronic/digital library can present.²⁴ Nandita spoke earlier about how Akshara had asked themselves at a critical moment of self-reflection, when the internet shifted thinking about how information might be accessed, "Who wants to come into our little room?" I'm thinking, I can *see* that room, and I certainly want to go in because I have a longing to handle stuff. I think, in fact the Internet has enhanced this desire because it's made people more aware of this early material's existence and contributes to the "feminist turn" or interest in archival histories and archive theory. Physical collections bear witness to community projects of self-identification and the critical importance of self-archiving.²⁵ I could do a mass digitisation project of the WAL slide collection, for example, but to merely digitize slides is to really strip the image away from the unique bearing of the artist's slide. These objects show how feminist work was sustained—by identifying yourself as an artist, for example, and not waiting to be acknowledged by a gallery or an outside institution. Material speaks back to us in that powerful way. Not only for the younger

generation, but also the original artists, who submitted the material years ago and who, in the '90s and later, might have cringed and said, "Oh, God, not the slides, that stuff is out of date. Why don't you just get rid of them and go digital?" Even they are coming back to these files and finding, "Oh, my goodness, this to me was lost material that I found again." I realise now that hanging on, despite the trough of interest in the 1990s to the term feminism, is informing how we think about the future. The "little room" and this "space" are absolutely paramount. I don't think I can hang on to the WAL forever, and in terms of my institution, well, there are many ways to fail to recognise the WAL collection that could make it disappear the minute I go out the door.²⁶

AP: A critical point, Althea, this tension or paradox around longevity, sustaining and developing. We're getting to be relatively influential institutions but at the same time remaining precarious because of the volatility of globalisation and paradigm shifts such as digitalisation. The pressure to change means there is often jeopardy for feminist organisations, their collections and approaches. Nandita, you are working in a very different context to the one I'm working in. How critical is it in Mumbai to still have feminist spaces?

NG: Space is a rare commodity in Mumbai; we're living on top of each other. We're an island, space is limited, so you just keep [building] upwards. So, it's not very easy for small organisations to have space. They're all rentals, and rental costs are high. We were fortunate because we were linked with another organisation which had a small space.²⁷ And then the funding started drying up, the Internet took over and usage was diminishing, and we had to move the library. We thought, what was our purpose, the essence in having the library? The essence was to disseminate feminist theory and practice. If the medium of the library is not there or not being used, how can we do it? We would take that knowledge to women, rather than them coming to us. For example, by disseminating feminist information, literature within the colleges. In the meantime, what happened to the library? We turned it into a reading room. Now a reading room, what does that mean? During the colonial period, we had all these reading rooms which were meant for reading newspapers and books. Now you're reading news on your tablet, right? So, reading rooms are relevant to people living in the poorest areas, where on average families of four or five were living in 10[ft] by 10[ft] and where girls had no place to study.²⁸ All the books are there, and the reading room is doing very well because all the girls... We kept it for girls and women;

they come from the neighbouring impoverished areas. They have cool drinking water. They have a fan above their heads. They're comfortable and they read.

AP: Radically overhauling former colonial reading rooms is a brilliant and urgent global project. GWL has developed a relationship of mutual support with a sister organisation in Kenya, called Book Bunk.²⁹ Their leadership is by phenomenal younger women who are developing these redundant, former colonial libraries, historically white-only reading rooms, and transforming them into relevant, brilliant, local resources that are, as you say, Nandita, thinking about the wider community's needs for space. In Book Bunk's case, the need for Wi-Fi access, toilets, beautiful spaces that people can encounter texts and exhibitions by and for them, and now a publishing arm. It's going to have a profound impact on people's capacity to survive and thrive in Nairobi. They are answering the sorts of questions you have raised in the development of Akshara. What can we do now? How can we use space? How can we make the information that we've got work for the people who need to see change in their lives? I recognise in Book Bunk, Bildwechsel, WAL, Akshara, Kvindemuseet, and GWL aligned approaches in terms of resilience and pragmatism, enterprising ways of working, fuelled by an understanding about international feminist praxis and thinking.

Institutional Knowledge, "Resilience" and Blueprints for Durable Feminist Institutions

AP: I wondered what you've each been doing about your accumulated institutional knowledge over and above the critical writing you are generating. Nandita, are you archiving and collecting, consciously, the records of Akshara?

NG: For a documentation centre, a resource centre, we are pretty bad at documenting our own history. [acknowledgement and laughter...] We were documenting the Indian Women's Movement but not our own. Yeah, that's a project I want to take up as soon as I leave the organisation.³⁰

AP: Merete, I really want to ask you more about the development of the working framework, the structure of Kvindemuseet, and how it was forged because at the outset you were experimenting with something new in Denmark?

MI: Yes, we were experimenting with creating an institution where only women were employed. Many people thought at that time that it would be very boring, to be in an institution where only women were engaged. But it was very interesting. It was an experiment, because some of the boundaries, some of the expectations, and the structuring of gender roles, were called into question. There were no men involved in the finance, or the labouring work, or building tasks—so-called “blue collar” work. We had to do everything. We had to be technical, clever, and we had to be financially competent. We had to be good at management and create new forms of human resources. The diversity amongst women was fantastic. Friendships developed across borders; former industrial workers were connected with women who liked to be in the kitchen creating food for the cafe, together with women who were hardcore separatists, very politically active on the left wing, and amongst them many women who were unsafe. Many women were engaged [in work] for six to nine months.³¹ We welcomed new women who could be part of the museum for this period and said goodbye to women who had been engaged for less than one year. Most of the women who said goodbye left with more self-confidence and were happier with themselves than they were when they had arrived. Our commitment was to the development of communities of “ordinary women.” This was a very important way of running the museum from the start in the incubation period, and establishing the rationale as the museum was coming together.

AP: I am interested in how feminist organisations are refiguring their institutions’ “organograms.”³² Can I ask, Nandita, do you have one?

NG: Yeah, we do. I think it represents or gives us a picture of what the organisation is today, but behind it (that is, your legal representation) we still ask, how do you function? Is your functioning really democratic? Is it really a listening and a learning organisation? We try to keep that culture alive.

AP: When I visited Kvindemuseet, there seemed to be both an intention and apparent realisation of the diversity you are speaking about. I encountered new citizens or women who had experience as refugees or asylum seekers, working, developing their ownership of the museum, and people with different backgrounds as researchers, curators, and so on working in collaboration, with a range of people feeling at home in the museum.



fig. 2. Merete Ipsen, *Kvindemuseet*, May 2017.
Photograph by: Adele Patrick.

MI: When we started, we had an open institution where all voices were equal and decisions were made through discussion and consensus. And that was all sorts of decisions; about whether we should go for state recognition, about which exhibitions we should make, about which building we should be in. When we were state-recognised, we were allowed to continue to have shared leadership, and that prevailed until I left. From the outset, we had a collective leadership; you talked with Jette Sandhal,³³ she was also part of it. We had been subject to ongoing criticism, amounting to “Stop the Women’s Museum,” but by around 2020 that was old news. It was now a different voice, “Oh, you are old-fashioned. It is something from the ‘70s/’80s, it is something left-wing, it is not official enough. Why don’t you make a professional board?” We agreed to explore this, and we had two or three years of discussion in our community. “What would be the positive things and what would be the negative things by changing?” We decided to change because we thought it could be easier for us to get money for developing the museum. So, we changed in 2015 and adopted a professional board—they were responsible for recruiting people, but not all of them were actual feminists. They thought that questions about women were important, but there’s a sort of difference, when you have it in your heart or you have it in your mind.³⁴

AP: I am interested in the ways that a rhetoric of resilience has come into play in contemporary social and political contexts. Having started this research with the working title of *Radical Resilience*, I became disillusioned with the weaponisation of the term in contexts where, for example, women, marginalised people, and feminist workers who might be carrying inordinate “weight” in both mainstream and counter-

cultural organisations were being asked to “suck up” poor pay and conditions, being challenged in a somewhat Trumpian way to be resilient. I am now exploring the idea of “endurance” with all its nuance, as a preferred term to discuss why some feminist projects and leadership have been sustained. Can you speak to this from your own perspective?

NG: At the moment, the word “resilience” in our context politically and socially is just connected with COVID. How are you being resilient in the pandemic, right? For me, resilience is weathering all the storms that come, all the changes that need to be made. Being resilient should be connected in some way with innovation and with flexibility. Because if you lose those two things, you’re not going to be resilient, you’re going to tear yourself apart. We know of other centres and similar projects that were very puritanical, in the sense that they kept to what they were doing, shifted a little bit here and there but, finally, in the case of some information-sharing organisations who didn’t adapt, the Internet consumed them. “Resilience” is when you intuit that something needs to change, you start making your own...you start moulding your own change.

AP: This is really interesting in relation to what you said earlier about active listening. There’s listening as well as leading, there’s an inherent dialogue there, sense checking, what’s happening in the world and what is happening in your locale.

NG: That listening was part of the democratic functioning of the organisation.

AP: Merete, from the origin of Kvindemuseet you have been involved in a complex dance with the local and national government. Can you discuss the ways you have negotiated this in order to sustain and grow the museum?

MI: It was interesting to have that sort of connection between our grassroots movement and the National Parliament. We had for years a very open dialogue with the National Parliament and City Council. It was very important for us not to be put in a political position, but to work in a broad way. But, nevertheless, people in conservative parts of the Ministry or the Parliament said that we were left-wing. Our response? “Maybe! No! Yes!” We have had periods where some people from the Conservative Party have said, “We had this experiment with the Women’s Museum. We will take this model and develop it in other settings, embedding aspects of the

learning into existing resources, so we can close it down.” We then needed to remobilise and invite politicians from all sides of the parties to the Museum and remind them what we were doing. So, several times, we had to struggle for survival.

AP: I feel that these moments of jeopardy, where the risk of survival or closure are very strong, are important to note as they underscore the need for continual vigilance and preparedness to address lobbying to dismantle our work, and the effort required in pushing back. Now with many new alliances demanding institutional change, for example, nascent Abolitionist Feminism developing endurance to survive crisis points, learning how organisations can and do survive seems to me vitally important knowledge to share.³⁵ Discovering how continuity, shifts, change, and adaptations can be managed in order to continue to work is a key aspect of our institutional knowledge. I think it’s going to be important as we face the challenges, and threats to equality, to develop a sense of meaningful sustainability. When I use these terms “resilience” and “endurance,” how do they sit with you, Althea?

AG: We had wrangled with the term “resilience” while formulating a theme for the WAL/Feminist Review Art in the Archive bursary call for projects in 2018. It seemed inappropriate to use the word “resilience” to question how artists sustain their practice. Ultimately, we shifted away from the idea of surviving or enduring to thriving through everyday acts of resistance. The WAL’s resilience actually comes from allowing itself to be redefined by other disciplines or other ways feminists are challenging the status quo. I describe the collection as being defined by every research question that people bring to me. It sounds passive, but it’s not. It’s a process of constantly troubling institutional knowledge, and my relationship with this material. It’s all about animating and activating the stuff in order to react to all the different issues that are coming through and being experienced. I guess, part of being enduring or resilient is to not have any borders or protective walls and feeling under siege, but staying permeable and open to discovery.

AP: I have been reflecting on how frequent it is for the founders of women’s cultural resources, in particular from our generation founded in the late 20th century, to stay for a long time, to endure.³⁶ In contrast, leaders starting out, such those at Book Bunk, are wary of Founder Syndrome.³⁷ Feminist colleagues in the cultural sector are noting they have either come under criticism

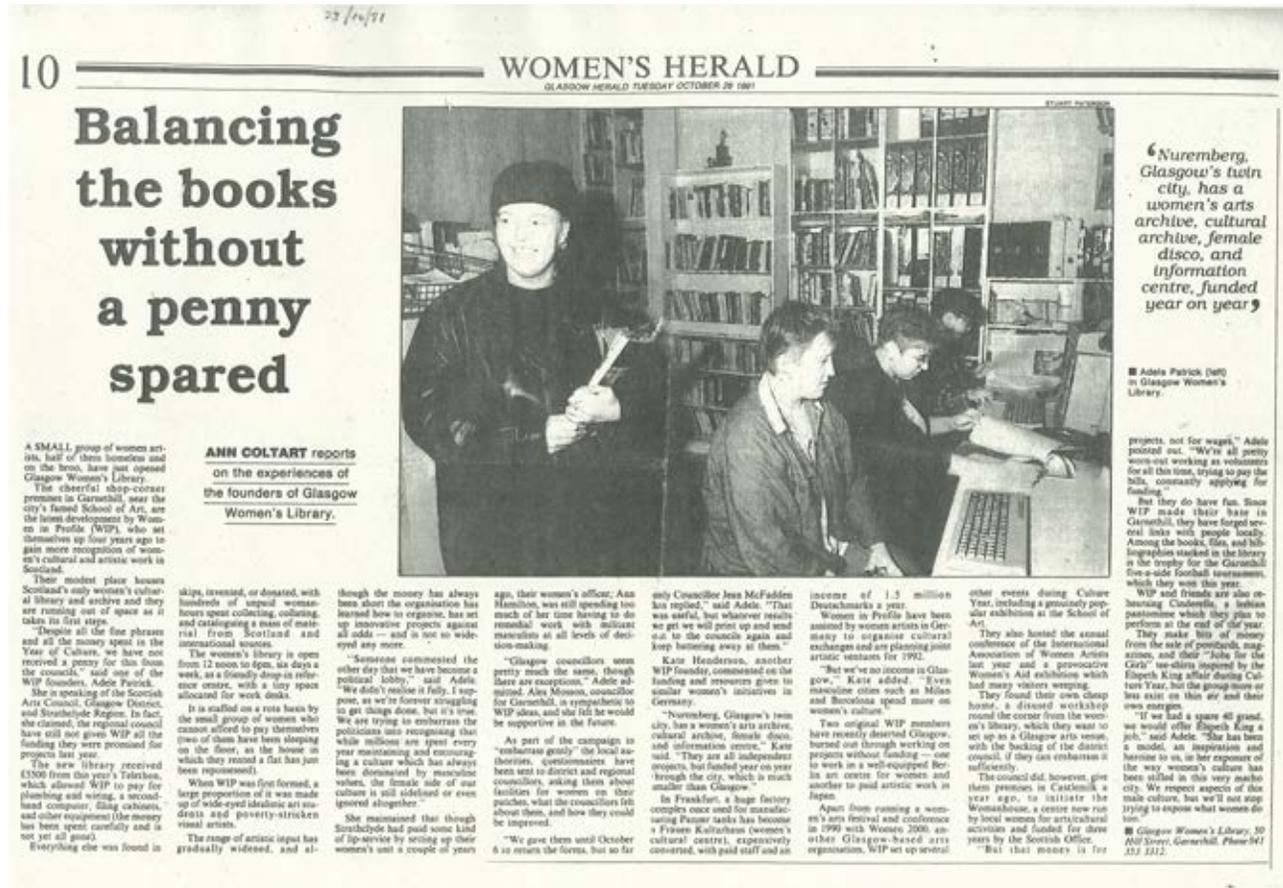


fig. 3. Ann Coltart, Adele Patrick (left) in an article "Balancing the books without a penny spared" about Glasgow Women's Library, Glasgow Herald, 29 October 1991. Courtesy of Glasgow Women's Library Archive and Special Collections.

or feared that they are "boomers" who are "bed blocking" younger leaders. I'm interested if you had any thoughts about "elders" being seen as carrying a lot of institutional knowledge and having a role to play as figureheads and, also, sense this urgency to make space for young leaders?

MI: Yes, I think that women founders of institutions, they take care of the institution, they take care of our "children." But, as you said, people working with collections often stay in place for a long period; you see it in the National Museum, and in the national libraries. If you are close to a collection, then you stay a very long time. Maybe these are feministic traits, skills shared also by men who work with collections. I think it's because we take care.³⁸

AP: How you might describe your own personal ethical approach to feminist leadership? You spoke a little bit there about "taking care."

MI: Yes, taking care, and being aware that you face dilemmas. You have to think and rethink and revitalise what you're doing almost every day, every week, because you will always meet the question about being old-fashioned or "too much." And so, female leadership and being in female leadership, you need to be flexible. Even if you have to be very hardcore on your own proposals, you need flexibility and a goal-orientated approach.

AP: Why do you think Kvindemuseet has survived and endured?

MI: I think it was because we remained relevant as a museum for society. We invited new groups to be part of the museum to organise meetings in our house. And then being careful that we gained respect for what we're doing, we sought respect; we would also sell out of some of our radicality from time to time, as a sort of a compromise to society.

Succession Planning, Transitioning From, and Embodying Collections

AP: Merete, you embody a feminist founder and leader who has successfully made the transition. Althea, what work are you doing about succession planning?

AG: It's non-existent. They don't want me to retire. They say "You can't retire!" I am caught up by this idea that you need to protect the organisation beyond your custodianship. Adele, at the beginning you identified one of the things that makes an organisation work or thrive—maybe thrive is a word we should hang on to—is to enable people to know exactly where they are in relation to the organisation. I worry about the perception that I know so much, and no one else could take over my role and work with this collection in the same way I do. I have become this person who seems to embody it. That was partly why I produced my PhD to redefine my relationship with the WAL collection as a separate body.³⁹ I don't want to reduce my hours working with the collection, but I want to draw back from being identified with the collection's endurance so deeply.⁴⁰

AP: Nandita earlier used that idea of "women embodying the collections," and you have raised it, too. That seems to be a profoundly ambivalent relationship that I know has made some transitioning for founders out of the institutions they have co/created deeply complex, not to say traumatic. I have been interrogating this in my research and thinking about the necessary work to be done to dissociate, in a way that's productive, like for you, Althea, doing a PhD. I am acutely conscious of this as I shift more deeply into the succession planning process, of being discretely myself, of being autonomous. I have noted how we are perceived as being sutured to the institution, whereas I favour the idea that GWL is a composite of everyone who's ever given time to it, and its chemistry is an amalgam of who is keeping it "live" now. There have been millions of instances of kindness that have brought that thing, that feminist institution, together. It's evolving every single day; the chemistry changes because different people are accessing it and developing it, and asking questions of it, finding themselves in it, and determining it. Nandita, how is your succession planning process going?

NG: We have two co-directors [both co-founders], I'm the older one. For me to go, it's easy, it's in safe hands. But then for her to go, it's going to be difficult. Also, we are a small organisation, and the young people now are looking at this as a profession, they want to earn a living



fig. 4. 3 Althea Greenan *the Shadow Costume* is comprised of two parts, firstly the tonal cubic coat and secondly the suspended frame. Together these two components come together to reflect a shadow presence of the Woman's Art Library and the role of Althea Greenan as its custodian." Costumes for Curators #3, Amelia Beavis-Harrison, 2013, Photo: Julian Hughes

wage. We could be idealists, but in this new atmosphere of more professionalism and less idealism, how will another person take on a small organisation? A large organisation is fine, you know, it's structured, it has funds, it has salaries, which are equivalent to market value, but a small one doesn't. It really requires a more dedicated, more idealistic person to look after it. To find such a person is going to be difficult, but we have to do it.

Notes

1 Having been involved in feminist (leadership) endeavours straddling the Voluntary, Library, Archive, Arts, Alternative Housing, Museums and Academic sectors, I undertook a Clore Leadership Fellowship in 2018 and subsequently two pieces of Post-Fellowship Research on Feminist Leadership. During the Fellowship and research periods, I hosted and collaborated with colleagues internationally, exploring ways that feminists have created organisations and evolved countercultural

approaches to working. Facets of the first stage of the research, *Moving Mountains*, can be found here: <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2020/03/02/moving-mountains-visioning-intersectional-feminist-leadership/>.

As I embarked on the Fellowship, public debates on leadership in the cultural sectors and wider politics were a lightning rod for “culture wars,” rising populism and radicalism. I began writing this contribution in the immediate aftermath of Trump’s second impeachment following his catalysing a White Supremacist seditious assault on the Capitol building, an attempt to retain power through force. Hyper-masculinisation and the reification of forms of command and control are evident in global leadership in the form of Trump, Bolsonaro, Putin, Lukashenko, Erdogan, Kim Jong-un, Museveni, and Modi...threatening progressive equalities campaigns.

2 During the research process, it was evident that the most effective defining and testing of feminist leadership has been developed in the Global South and by Women of Colour. See, for example, African Feminist Forum, “Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists,” Proceedings of the African Feminist Forum, Accra, Ghana, 15-19 November 2006 (Ghana: African Women’s Development Fund, 2007), <http://awdflibrary.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/119/AFF%20Feminist%20Charter%20Digital%20%E2%80%93%20English.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>.

I have been inspired by discussions with feminist leaders in Brazil, Kenya, London, India, USA, Bologna, Denmark, and Glasgow.

The term “intersectional” was first theorised by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw attests that all aspects of a person’s lived experiences can impact on the ways in which discrimination impacts, a theory explored in—Kimberlé Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings*. (New York: The New Press, 2017).

3 Harney and Moten defined the term “undercommons” to describe the ways that Black people who experience marginalisation (for example, exclusion from access to cultural assets) forge communities and resources based on belonging. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

4 Addressing the array of ways organisations are responding to lack of relevance and the imperative to change is the focus of a programme of work developed with former GWL colleague Rachel Thain-Gray, *Equality in Progress*. Through work with external institutions, I have had the opportunity to reflect on the progress (or otherwise) of UK cultural organisations in relation to (feminist) ethical leadership and governance, inclusion,

and access. Rachel Thain-Gray and Adele Patrick, “Research from a Grassroots Museum” *Equality in Progress*, Glasgow Women’s Library, 2018, https://womenslibrary.org.uk/gwl_wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/EiP-Report-Research-from-a-Grassroots-Museum-180615.pdf.

5 I have written extensively about the GWL origin story, for example, Adele Patrick, “Claiming Space and Being Brave: Activism, Agency and Art in the Making of a Women’s Museum,” in *Feminism and Museums: Intervention, Disruption and Change*, ed. J.C. Ashton (Edinburgh and Boston: MuseumsEtc, 2017), 184-215;

Adele Patrick, “How Art, Activism and Feminist Agency Shaped a Ground-breaking Museum” *Museum ID*, 2017, <https://museum-id.com/art-activism-feminist-agency-shaped-ground-breaking-museum/>;

Adele Patrick, “March of Women and the Dynamism of Equality at Glasgow Women’s Library,” in *Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum*, eds. Adele Chynoweth, Bernadette Lynch, Klaus Petersen, Sarah Smed (Oxford: Routledge, 2020), Part 1.3.

6 I have been inspired by many international feminist co-founders of cultural resources. For this article, I sought perspectives from contrasting contexts on founding and nurturing spaces and collections. Nandita’s work at Akshara had a profound impact on GWL, not least, as providing the template for a feminist classification system for our library resource. Having visited Kvindemuseet in 2017, I was interested to reconnect with Merete who had subsequently retired from the organisation she had co-founded in the 1980s. Althea Greenan has been involved with the development of WAL from the early 1980s and has experienced being a volunteer and a paid worker, working with it as both an independent collection and after its transition to a special collection within an academic institution. The filmed recordings of these discussions will appear on the GWL website as part of a year-long GWL programme of shared thinking, conversations and reflections 2021/2022.

7 bildwechsel is “an umbrella organisation for women, and their communities, who are involved in media, culture and art.” <https://www.bildwechsel.org/info/en/index.html>.

8 The term Social Movement Organisations (SMO) was developed by Mayer and Ash in the 1960s. Mayer N. Zald and Roberta Ash, “Social Movement Organizations: Growth, Decay and Change,” *Social Forces* 44, no. 3 (1966): 327-341. SMOs carry out tasks necessary for any social movement to survive and to be successful. An example of a social movement supported by SMOs is the US Black Civil Rights Movement composed of

specific SMOs including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the NAACP.

9 Following the Reform Movement and then the Independence Movement against the British, Nandita co-authored *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992). Around that time, Nandita and co-author Nandita Shah were co-founding Akshara.

10 *Akshara* means the word or an alphabet.

11 Nandita: "This was the time when there were no... the computers were very... [Microsoft] Word had just come to India. We were struggling with it, and we actually used to type out stuff on stencils." GWL's history also maps the period of the development of the Internet, the first web page was served on the open Internet, in 1991, the year GWL launched.

12 My research with feminist organisation founders has revealed the serendipitous ways that many feminist organisations crystallised. Nandita discusses Akshara's initiation as part of a zeitgeist; she had written her book, there was a growing political demand for gender disaggregated information, something needed to be done. I have written about this moment of coalescing circumstances in relation to GWL, for example, Adele Patrick, "Making Space: Glasgow Women's Library," *Medium* 4 May 2020, <https://medium.com/making-space/making-space-glasgow-womens-library-41f12eb-6fec9>.

Once forged organisations that endure appear to be mobilised by what adrienne maree brown in her book *Emergent Strategy* has called the "North Star." adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy* (California: AK Press, 2017).

13 In 1994, I attended the Know How conference in Amsterdam hosted by the Dutch women's library Atria. The gatherings took place every four years, connecting hundreds of representatives from women's libraries, archives, and information centres globally. These were not UK or American dominated feminist gatherings. There was a conscious intention to centre Women of Colour, women in the Global South, and Indigenous women.

14 Women Artists Slide Library was first founded in 1983.

15 Women Artists Slide Library Journal and its subsequent incarnations can be accessed at "Collections," Goldsmiths, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/make/collection/>.

16 In her fascinating dialogue with colleague Catherine Grant, AG charts an array of topics from endurance, the hurt that archives can engender, and the complexity of the relationship between an "undercommons" resource and its incorporation into an academic space. Catherine

Grant and Althea Greenan, "Lost and Found: Feminism, archives and the university under lockdown," *Goldsmiths-Press*, Goldsmiths, <https://www.gold.ac.uk/goldsmiths-press/features/lost-and-found/>

17 MI was involved in emergent Women's Studies, and as a young psychologist, with other feminists, she organised colloquia and seminars. She noted that, "At that time the only ones reading the ground-breaking research we were developing were ourselves."

18 There was a very high level of unemployment in Denmark in 1982 at the time MI co-founded the Women's Museums Association. She remembered, "We used several funding bodies to create jobs for unemployed women." Later in the 1980s, Women in Profile, the group out of which GWL sprang, also "tweaked" a range of employment schemes to sustain the project.

19 I have discovered that feminist institutions are idiosyncratic and do not readily conform to "patriarchal" command and control structure, neither do they conform to models of either "essential" collectivity or "the tyranny of structurelessness." Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," *The Second Wave*, 1972, <https://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

20 In her classic text, *Issues at Stake* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992), on the theory and practice of the India Women's Movement, NG discusses how feminist friendship networks or people who share ideological standpoints come together continually and forge organisations (usually because the status quo is intolerable). In discussions with NG, AG, MI and others, I have been keen to ask how we can better support feminist organisations to acquire or have access to deep knowledge about group dynamics, ways of "managing" each other (since these are complex), and critical aspects that lead to the sustainability (or not) of feminist projects. What might feminist leadership mean? How might we best nurture each other in taking on and sharing leadership responsibilities?

21 Distinguishing lesbian and feminist organisations from academic and mainstream institutions is an ongoing concern for some enduring resources such as Lesbian Herstory Archives, launched in New York in 1974. Shawn(ta) Smith-Cruz, "Getting from then to now: Sustaining the Lesbian Herstory Archives as a Lesbian Organization," *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 20, no. 2 (2016): 213-33, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2015.1083827>.

22 Feminist librarians have long critiqued the patriarchal, misogynistic structuring of classifications systems such as the Dewey Decimal model. Akshara coined a feminist classification system which influenced the development of the system used at GWL. For a wider survey of this topic, see Rosemary Catherine Ilett,

“Outstanding Issues: Gender, Feminisms and Librarianship” (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2003).

23 A characteristic of the work of feminist cultural organisations from the 1980s, such as bildweschel, Hamburg (a hugely influential model for GWL), Akshara and WAL, is their geographic specificity (they are reflective of their locale) but also thoroughly internationally connected.

24 AG noted: “Ironically, for the WAL, we produced a publication from 1983 to 2002, and the electronic version of that publication has generated more income than the physical one ever did with the surge of interest in feminist studies, we get around 2000 pounds a year that I use, I ring fence to commission art, new artwork and interventions, creative work with the WAL collections, so that maintains the WAL collection, as a creative space.”

25 AG acknowledged the importance of being in a productive dialogue with projects like the Black Cultural Archives and for the collections within WAL such as the Women of Colour index, built up in the 80s and up until 1994, to be made accessible.

26 For AG some of the vulnerability facing WAL was “because the collection is part of ‘special collections.’” GWL is the sole women’s resource of its kind in the UK with core funding and a significant staff cohort (currently twenty-seven). Most feminist cultural spaces, collections, or cultural organisations are part of an academic collection or are working as a volunteer-led, grassroots projects (there are some exceptions, such as the East End Women’s Museum, a Community Interest Company): <https://eastendwomensmuseum.org>. My meetings with feminist leaders of cultural organisations have highlighted the precarity of both these modes of working.

27 A space of 20 feet by 20 feet. Nandita remembers: “When we had students coming in for reference, we could not give them any tables and chairs because that would have occupied everything. So, they sat on the floor, with little tables where they sat and wrote, and of course, everybody was used to it. For you, it is a very different thing, but we sit on the floor all the time.”

28 The Indian government had, after independence, set up a huge network of educational institutions, and there was an aspiration for people to be educated. Nandita spoke about how Akshara responded to this new context: “Now, if you want to educate yourself, you need to work and you need to refer to texts and you need to be somewhere quiet where you can think. So, we turned the library into that; the collection is there, intact, we have a beautiful classification system, which we’ve also digitised.”

29 Since 2018, GWL has been learning from and sharing skills with a sister organisation in Nairobi, Book Bunk. <https://www.bookbunk.org>.

30 This paradoxical neglect of their own organisational records and institutional knowledge by feminist collections whilst they strive to uncover and safeguard the hidden histories and documenting of others is widespread, including at GWL. AG has done much to ensure this is not the case at WAL.

31 This was due to the conditions of funding.

32 Organograms or organisational structural diagrams are largely viewed as the preserve of HR, as a functional schematic. They frequently illustrate the “stuck” nature and outmoded thinking around management and leadership. I have been exploring feminist refiguring of organograms. If organograms describe power, what does this say in specific feminist/non-feminist organisations? What could it say? How could it be used as a catalyst for visioning change?

33 Jette Sandhal was a co-founder of Kvindemuseet. She was until recently the chair of the International Council of Museums Standing Committee for Museum Definition, Prospects, and Potentials and involved in febrile discussions over the meaning of the museum. Jonathan Knott, “Icom in turmoil after resignations,” *Museums Association*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/07/icom-museum-definition-row-rumbles-on/#>.

34 MI raised the issue of a defaulting to single leadership model after she and the other co-directors left Kvindemuseet. “When I and the two other leaders left the museum, the board decided there should be one director, a sign of the times. I could not knock on the door and say, ‘Oh, I don’t understand why you’ve done that.’ Today, it is not common or agreed that shared leadership is good. I think it will come again.” Akshara and GWL also have co-directors. Shared leadership is a characteristic of feminist organisations that is rarely found in the mainstream. A welcome departure (and a possible sign of a shift in sectoral thinking?) was the appointment of joint heads Sara Wajid and Zak Mensah for Birmingham Museums in 2020. Geraldine Kendall Adams, “Sara Wajid and Zak Mensah to share CEO role at Birmingham Museums Trust,” *Museums Association*, 14 September 2020, <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2020/09/sara-wajid-and-zak-mensah-to-share-ceo-role-at-birmingham-museums-trust/>.

35 One definition of Abolitionist Feminism suggests that it “invites us to consider the world we want, and how to organise to build it. Seeking a world beyond

prisons, Abolitionist Feminism focusses our attention on developing stronger communities and bringing about gender, race, and economic justice. It encourages us to consider our approach to problems from a social justice rather than criminal justice perspective; systemically rather than individually.” <https://www.ippr.org/juncture-item/what-is-abolitionist-feminism-and-why-does-it-matter>.

36 Durbahn, the founder of bildweschel in Hamburg, has been running the organisation since 1979, and she’s still at the helm. Marianne Pitzen founded the Frauen-Museum in Bonn in 1981 and remains its director; Maxine Wolfe is part of the volunteer collective that has run the Lesbian Herstories Archives in New York for decades.

37 Book Bunk was founded in 2017.

38 I am reminded here of the etymological link between care and curation. In Latin the past participle of curate is “to take care of.”

39 Althea Greenan, “Feminist Net-work: Digitization and Performances of the Women’s Art Library Slide Collection” (PhD diss, University of Brighton, 2018), <https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?did=1&uin=uk.bl.ethos.754023>.

40 AG discusses a strategy for disavowing the perceived power of the archivist in a recent project. “One of the themes of the bursary was ‘kill the archivist’; what would happen if you didn’t have this person who becomes the kind of mediator, the facilitator. So, here we are in the pandemic where people have to work virtually with this material if they get to work at all. So already we’re being displaced by technology. So, it’s looking at that in a way where it’s not a straightforward displacement. There’s a critical way of working with that, and with those dynamics that I think is interesting.”

Adele Patrick Director, Creative Development, Delivery and Engagement, Glasgow Women’s Library (GWL) (www.womenslibrary.org.uk), has been developing innovative cultural projects rooted in equalities and academic research and community learning and teaching for over thirty years. Adele co-founded GWL in 1991 and has had a key leadership role helping grow the organisation from a grassroots project led by volunteers into a Recognised Collection of National Significance. GWL is widely regarded as change making organisation in the museums, library and wider cultural sectors, and in 2018 GWL was shortlisted for the prestigious Art Fund Museum of the Year Award. Trained as a designer at Glasgow School of Art (where she

subsequently taught Gender, Art and Culture), Adele has been active in many feminist cultural projects, including a series of alternative housing projects including, currently, Raising the Roof. https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3&v=ZopyBg-Zmds&feature=emb_logo A collaborator with writers, visual artists, filmmakers, and performers, Adele was awarded an Engage Scholarship for Excellence in Gallery Education in 2016. Having completed her doctoral research on class, fashioning, and taste in 2004, Adele subsequently received Honorary DLitts from both Glasgow School of Art and University of Strathclyde. Adele publishes widely, (for example, a recent chapter in *Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum* (Routledge, 2021)), and following a Clore Leadership Fellowship in 2018/2019, her post-fellowship research has focussed on feminist leadership. Some of her findings are accessible here: <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/2020/03/02/moving-mountains-visioning-intersectional-feminist-leadership/>

Kvindemuseet (Women’s Museum) changed its name to **Køn – Gender Museum Denmark** over the course of these discussions. Founded in 1982, the museum is located in the former Town Hall of Aarhus and houses a collection of national significance reflecting histories of women including motherhood and housework, feminist activism and politics. Kvindemuseet/Køn works with students and schools, delivers sex education classes, undertakes research—for example, currently into images of girls in contemporary arts and visual culture—and works continually with visual artists, curating four to six exhibitions a year.

Akshara is a Mumbai-based resource, also founded in 1982, that has “ripples of development”: promoting gender awareness and equality advocacy with individuals, groups, members of the public, and the state. Akshara work directly with girls and women, offering scholarships and a raft of learning opportunities. They have published germinal texts and online resources. Initially a library and reading room designed for activists and students of women’s studies, Akshara developed an influential feminist library classification system that has been widely adopted and adapted.

Women's Art Library (WAL), formerly Women Artists' Slide Library (WASL), was founded in 1976. It began as a depository for women artists that grew into a collection documenting in slide and other forms the work of thousands of international women artists. WASL published books, catalogues, and a long-running magazine (1983-2002). The collection is now part of the Library Special Collections, Goldsmiths, University of London, where it continues to support artist commissions and research.

Glasgow Women's Library grew from a grassroots project (Women in Profile) initiated in mid-1984 to ensure that women were represented during Glasgow's year as European City of Culture, 1990. Following the delivery of a groundbreaking pan-arts festival, GWL was founded in 1991. After a decade working as a volunteer-run project, GWL has grown steadily into the sole Accredited Museum dedicated to women's history in the UK. It has continually worked with creatives, commissioning, curating, and collaborating with artists, and is currently developing projects with Ingrid Pollard and Olivia Plender.

Relationality in Feminist Collective Practice

Alex Martinis Roe and Helena Reckitt

This conversation between artist Alex Martinis Roe and curator and researcher Helena Reckitt is based on a public talk that took place during Martinis Roe's exhibition *To Become Two* at The Showroom in London, on 18 May 2017. Following the invitation to revisit their talk in the context of *OnCurating's* special issue on Instituting Feminism, Martinis Roe and Reckitt offered some further reflections on and clarifications to the original dialogue. An audio recording of the talk, introduced by curator Eva Rawson and featuring some additional audience questions not included below, is available here: <https://www.theshowroom.org/events/alex-martinis-roe-an-introduction-to-to-become-two>.

Feminist Networks

Helena Reckitt: It's great to be back here at The Showroom, for the London opening of your exhibition *To Become Two*. I met you here a year and a half ago, and a lot has happened since then, including my taking part in the workshop for your film *Our Future Network*, which is a part of the show downstairs.

Alex Martinis Roe: Is it only a year and a half?

HR: I know! One of the interesting things about your work, that's central to your concerns, is how your projects have this generative effect. So, I'm looking around the room and I can see people who have been touched by your practice, by participating in a workshop or inviting you to make a work. Such as in Barcelona with our colleague over there, Veronica Valentini from Bar



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two*, installation view, The Showroom, London, 2017. Exhibition design Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Photo: Daniel Brooke.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #7 – Productive Refusals*, developed with Helena Reckitt, 2016.

Project. There's Gabby Moser, who took your workshop here as part of *Now You Can Go*,¹ and went on to co-found the feminist working group Emilia-Amalia in Toronto, which is inspired by some practices of feminist citation and annotation that you work with. I see Sara Paiola, who some of you might recognise from the film *Our Future Network*, which is on the big screen downstairs. She workshopped a piece around mothers and caring for the carers. And I recognise some MFA Curating students from Goldsmiths who will be doing your workshop that starts here tomorrow. I find this generative effect of your work so inspiring. As you've consciously attempted to build a feminist network—can you start by talking about that?

AMR: I remain critical of the solo artist model that I was presented with as a young art student, and I wanted to find a way of doing art with a feminist politics that presents and creates a relational model of subjectivity, where subjects only come into being through relationships with others. So, I've tried to use my position as the artist as a link between the experiences that I've had of other people's work and among people who come into contact with mine. That's what I mean when I use the term "network": I use it to describe relationships among "influences," "artist," and "audience," which are usually considered separate positions. I attempt to turn those relationships into a social space for dialogue among all the people who take part.

HR: Let's start with the example of the project that I took part in, *Our Future Network*, which is part of your exhibition here. The way that you worked with myself

and twenty-one other women who participated in the film was really interesting. When you first invited us, you were transparent about what the project entailed. We were going to stay at a rural university retreat in former East Germany for three days, you explained, out of which we would develop feminist propositions for the future. You asked each of us to think about a proposition that we could share. And then you met with each of us, in my case over Skype, to workshop our idea. You then wrote up my proposition which you sent me and which I tweaked a bit. So, already you had taken on a mediating role, in which you reflected my ideas and helped to shape them into a publicly shareable form. During the workshop, we each presented our proposition to the rest of the group plus yourself, the camera crew, and the curatorial team, where it was discussed and experimented with. So, my proposition went from being something that might have stayed in my head for years, without finding public expression, to becoming collective property.

My proposition, which explored how refusal can be productive and generative, was somewhat contested during the workshop. Some people had problems with the idea of withdrawing labour and care, while others got excited about the prospect of making invisibilised activities visible and, hence, potentially more valued and less taken for granted. The process of sharing the proposition was exhilarating, as the idea took on new life amongst members of the group.



Alex Martinis Roe, *A story from Circolo della rosa*, film still of a photograph courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative archive, 2014.

AMR: That was the idea, to try and pinpoint one proposition that was already in each of the contributor's practices. I think there are multiple propositions emerging every moment in whatever you're doing, but the task was to try and find one that linked the research I'd been doing to something that was important to you at that time. And to try and then turn it into something that could be done by more people as a catalyst for collective politics.

And, I guess, the impetus for that idea comes from the Italian feminist practice of Starting from One's Self—the practice of actively self-constructing a liberated female subjectivity by working through and valuing one's own experience and difference. Personal knowledge constitutes and shapes one's political practice, rather than, for example, the idea that there is knowledge out there about what it means to be a woman that you don't yet have and so you join the consciousness-raising group to get it. In Italian feminism, and specifically the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative, the practice of Starting from One's Self is extended into a collective project through the Practice of Relations—constructing these differenced female subjectivities through relationships with other women. In particular, relationships of *affidamento* (entrustment), theorised and practiced by the Bookstore co-operative, are central to the way I structured the *Our Future Network* project. Relationships of *affidamento*—between two women as political partners—are characterised by commitment and mutual support, utilising their differing knowledge, competences and resources to affirm each other's political desire and facilitate each other's political work through symbolic

recognition of each other. *Affidamento*, as an organised political practice that foregrounds the responsibility women should have to each other, thus fosters the creation of relational female subjectivities and female society and culture. With *Our Future Network*, I had done a lot of historical research and I wanted to bring that into dialogue with my interlocutors in order to develop ways to make that knowledge useful to collective political practice. I structured the *Our Future Network* project using Starting from One's Self and *affidamento*: so, it was through affirmation of your differing knowledges in relation to mine, and through mutual entrustment that we developed the Propositions.

Practice of Authority

HR: Let's talk some more about Italian feminism, as it's been such a rich resource for you and, more recently, for me, too. In my case, having done quite a lot of research around feminism and art, I was blindsided to discover this rich collective culture emerging in Italy from the late '60s about which I knew hardly anything, as it had barely been disseminated within Anglophone circles, even feminist ones. I found the Italian feminist recognition and celebration of difference between women that you just highlighted particularly exciting. It wasn't about flattening difference under the banner of sameness or consensus, which has been a hallmark of Anglophone feminism, where the impetus to identify common conditions under patriarchy led to a denial of disparity and difference.

When did you first encounter Italian feminism?



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Be Two / To Become Two*, Powder-coated steel, glass, MDF, *Libreria delle donne di Milano*, *Non credere di avere dei diritti: la generazione della libertà femminile nell'idea e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*, (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, first edition 1987, this edition 2005); The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). Commissioned by the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art for NEW13, 2013. Photo: Andrew Curtis.

AMR: I came into contact with the ideas a very long time ago. My first contact, I think, was when I was about twenty years old, and I happened to find a particular book in the library, sitting next to another book that I was looking for. It was an essay collection called *Engaging with Irigaray*,² a fantastic compendium from the early '90s, and I started reading it instead of the book I'd been after.

The Italian feminist contribution to that volume was written by the Bookstore co-operative's Luisa Muraro. What attracted me to it was its practical application of the philosophy of difference the collection was concerned with. All the other texts in the book had opened my mind in such an extraordinary way, and then when I read Muraro's text, "Female Genealogies," I thought, "so, that's how you do this." Everyone in the book talked about the importance of a politics of difference, but the Italians had some practical answers. They'd actually been trying it out. As an artist, I'm always looking for practical solutions. How do you go about putting theory into practice?

They refuse the consensus model where everyone has to agree and they're all in the same position as each other. They realised, through a range of experiences of different group meetings and also contact with the group *Psychanalyse et Politique* in France, that their consensus model was really holding them back. The problem was that in the horizontal group structures that were common at the time, there is no acknowledged disparity. Although horizontal political models aim to produce

equality among participants, pre-existing power structures can remain dominant if there is no open negotiation of different social positions, competences, and desires.

There were a couple of meetings organised by *Psychanalyse et Politique*, which were attended by this group from Milan in 1972. There's a film about one of these meetings in my exhibition downstairs. The Milanese women hadn't yet formed the Bookshop group, they were part of a small *autocoscienza* group (similar to Anglophone consciousness-raising groups). Some of them went to these meetings, and they noticed that *Psychanalyse et Politique* actually had a leader, Antoinette Fouque, which horrified them: How could there be a leader in the women's movement? And the French women replied that Antoinette Fouque had a pre-eminence and qualities which drew other women to her and which there was no point denying. It was this idea that led them to develop their approach to collective politics, which acknowledges female authority and disparities among women. Their work on the difference among women is important, because it provides a model where sameness and identity are not the departure point for collective politics. Instead, it is the differences among women, including their different knowledges, social positions, competences, and desires which motivate their alliance and enable them to create a new social order. In what the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative call the Practice of Authority, they draw on Hannah Arendt's differentiation of the concept from totalitarianism, with which it is often confused. What



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics; there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, film still of a photograph of a meeting of groups from Milan, Turin, and Paris at Varigotti, Liguria in 1973, courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative, 2014.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was an unusual way of doing politics; there were friendships, loves, gossip, tears, flowers...*, super 8 still transferred to digital, 2014.

they mean by authority is the way someone is accepted in a role without question. The trust that others have in their position is an acknowledgement of their competence and trustworthiness. Diagnosing that a lack of distinction among women in patriarchy is what causes systematic rivalry and betrayal, their Practice of Authority is to support each other's desires to take on a role, acknowledging distinctive knowledge and achievement and trusting in each other's competence. That is how they recognise their differences in their relations with each other and how they create value. It's also the way that they distribute decision-making powers. It's very much based on trust and, in a way, love. It's that commitment to supporting each other in an affirmative way that I think is so interesting.

HR: And it encompasses desire—

AMR: Yes, desire.

HR: ...which recognises the libidinal quality of education, as well. When you're a student you desire what the teacher has and knows. You desire them and you desire to be them. You then may want to overthrow the teacher to realise your own desire. But I think that's really powerful and maybe even a little bit taboo in an era where we understandably want to be careful about potentially abusive power relationships and dynamics.

AMR: Certainly, through this project of organising, so many meetings, and being in this kind of situation quite



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #11 – Writing as a Transformative Practice*, developed with Federica Buetti, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #12 – The Practice of Listening*, developed with Lucia Farinati, 2016.

a bit, I've realised there is this really intense eroticism in gatherings of women who are trying to change the world and themselves and their relationships. It's quite extraordinary, and it's something that I hadn't 100% anticipated.

HR: There's a lovely moment in *Our Future Network* when one of the women, Lucia Farinati, says, "I feel very spontaneous. Maybe it's a reaction to being surrounded by so many women. The female energy—it's so exciting! I'm super energised by all this!" She's so alive, you can sense the excitement surging through her. But I don't want to romanticise your practice. Taking part in the workshop for *Our Future Network* was certainly very inspiring, but there were some points of friction as well, especially around the desire that some participants expressed for a safe space. How, in your experience, can we deal with friction within a feminist queer context?

AMR: The friction during the meeting arose due to a need for more unstructured time and more explicit attention to making adaptations to exercises to accommodate different needs. I had planned the meeting a little too tightly timewise, because the idea for the project was really ambitious and we had limited time and resources. As the organiser, I had the responsibility to make sure that there was enough time and energy to put into experimenting with each of the Propositions that had been developed in advance of the meeting. I had another competing responsibility to the fact that we were making a film, which had been co-commissioned by four institutional partners attached to planned exhibitions and with funding from other bodies.

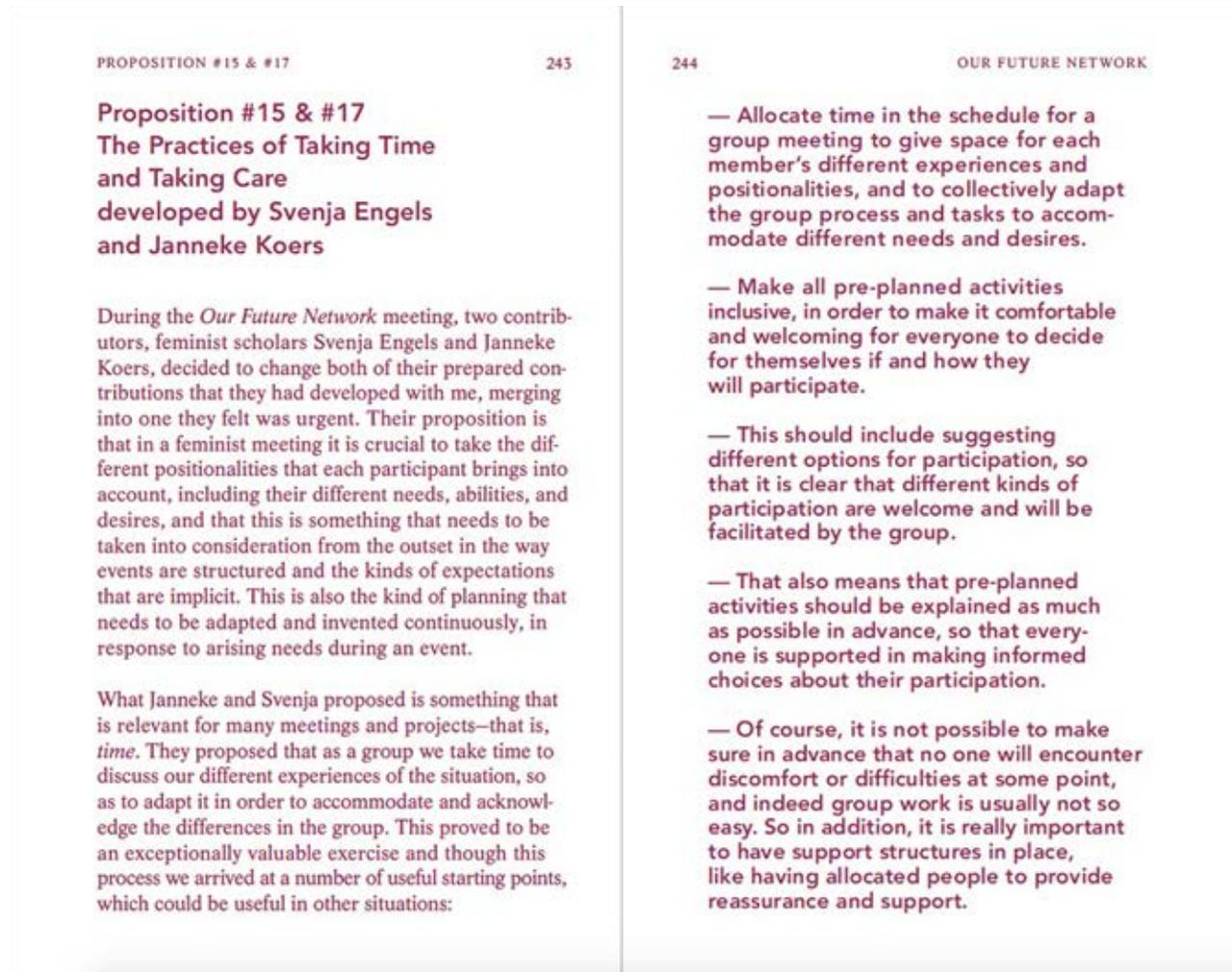
The friction that occurred, I think that always happens in group situations. It's the group activating its agency and people deciding that they want or need something different than the current structure. My main priority at



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #10 – Theory in More Formats*, developed with Vasso Belia, 2016.

the time was to make space for that without betraying the other two major commitments that I had, i.e., seeing through the Propositions (my responsibility to each participant and their contribution) and the production of the film. So, it was very much a juggling act. I had, actually, anticipated and planned for some of the things that were asked for in that moment of friction to an extent that, I think, was actually not recognised, because people are often too critical of those in leadership positions. I have thought back on that quite a bit, and it was a very good lesson that you always have to make time for unplanned group process. So, whenever you're leading a meeting, you actually have to schedule time for the group's agency to take over. Because filmmaking is so much about time management and time costs so much, I hadn't factored in more unstructured time. So, that's a lesson learned—it's just necessary.

I think that the culture of making safer spaces is important in that it's trying to make sure that people with less power in a situation are accounted for and supported to have a voice. Alongside it, there is, however, also a culture of shaming on the rise, where structural social problems (like ableism in the context of low-budget filmmaking) are too often framed as individual respon-



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice* (Berlin and Milan: Archive Books, 2018), 243-244.

sibility. Certainly, dominant power structures are reproduced through the way we embody and enact them in minor ways every day, but solidarity is so important to political change, which means people need to feel able and encouraged to take the risk of participating. So, I think some of it ends up being the wrong focus, it's not about controlling yourself and the way that you act, it's about committing to a project that you're all interested in. The emphasis falls in a slightly more individualistic place than I would put it. I think commitment is one of the most important factors in generating the kind of feminist group dynamic that safe space discourse is concerned with. Rather than saying "I'm not going to say this, I'm not going to say that," and go silent because you're worried you might say the wrong thing, I think it would be better to just be committed to the group and the project. Thinking instead, I'm not going to leave when it gets difficult. Or I'm not going to abandon somebody if I have made a mistake and hurt them,

rather than constantly trying to prevent yourself from making mistakes. So, I guess, there's a kind of openness and a commitment that, I think, is probably more important for making safer spaces than self-policing.

HR: And I would say vulnerability is fundamental to that, because, to me, a safe space is one in which you can make mistakes. There's the whole notion of checking your privilege, which is something that I realise might be hard for me to do, as I have accrued privileges, even though it doesn't always feel that way to me. So, I'm going to either be there with my baggage, and be able to be vulnerable, or I'm not going to go, because it feels like a set-up in which I'm bound to fail.

AMR: That statement, "check your privilege," I respect the place that it comes from, but I think it appeals to objectivity in a way that, I think, feminism just can't afford to do. Of course, we need a language for describ-



Alex Martinis Roe, *It was about opening the very notion that there was a particular perspective*, film still of a photograph of Sydney University students protesting in support of the Builders Labourers Federation by Meredith Burgmann, 2017.

ing oppressions, but I don't think that we should rely on "objectivity" to mediate political alliances, when it is the "objective" markers of "what" we are (gender, race, class, sexuality etc) that are oppressive. Liberation politics needs to acknowledge how imposed identities subjugate specific groups, but that should not override the solidarity process of creating bonds with one another based on common goals. As Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor says about the Combahee River Collective, a Black, feminist, lesbian, socialist collective that coined the term "identity politics" in the USA in the '70s (which originally meant something very different than it has come to mean in neoliberal politics): "An important idea for them [the Combahee River Collective] is a rejection of the idea of the exclusivity of the 'oppression Olympics' and instead they focussed on how to overcome the difference among people to defeat a system that works on the oppression of others."³

Working in Alliance

HR: There's a concept of Working in Alliance that you're developing in workshops as part of this exhibition. That seems like a valuable response to some of the challenges of Call-Out Culture, as it recognises the fact that each of us starts from and is shaped by certain experiences, and we can't cover everything.

AMR: Yes, I guess, what interests me about working on alliances is that when you're thinking about solidarity, there's a pressure to think that it requires unity. I think that's a problem, because, as you say, you can't address

everything at every moment. I think it's really important that different political movements and projects retain their specificity *within* alliances. I think the expectation that feminism be one thing, and that it has to account for everything, is an impossible ask, because feminist politics comes out of situated experiences. I was very inspired when I was working on *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective* (2017). It looks at a particular history from the '70s in Sydney when a number of different social movements joined together. Not into one unified movement, but through strategic alliances different groups leveraged power in one place to change things in another. They used their activist networks to achieve their aims, but it wasn't out of a reduction of their differences or trying to subsume different projects into one thing.

Limits of Friendship

HR: I am also interested in talking about the limits of friendship as a methodology, which links to our discussion about allyship. As part of the Feminist Duration Reading Group that I am part of, I have just read an interesting article by Sasha Roseneil about how female friendship was re-evaluated during second wave feminism. Nonetheless, Roseneil ends by cautioning that friendship is not a universal panacea that can be seen to solve all feminism's problems.

As a personal relationship which tends to bind together people who are socially similar, it cannot resolve all the political and ethical issues

feminism faces, not least the problem of its constitutive outside—the enemy and the stranger. If we are to develop a politics that is not just concerned with those within the charmed circle of love, affection, and care, we have to consider our collective obligations to the lonely, the unloved, and the uncared for. We have to recognize what we all know from personal experience: that friendship is not always easy, that it can struggle with difference, and that it sometimes flounders when friends misrecognize each other. Friendship can cause us pain, as well as offering us care and support.⁴

AMR: I'm glad you asked about the limits of friendship. I think that in the continued colonialism of Australia, for example, where I am now primarily based, it is difficult to start political collaboration among First Nations and non-Indigenous feminists with the assumption that friendship would be welcome, because there is so much rightful anger and distrust due to the long history of dispossession and violence against First Nations communities. I think building alliances comes first, which may include or result in friendship. But the emphasis is on the common project, to which mutual commitment can create the opportunity to establish trust. The Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative named the trust and commitment in political relationships between women *affidamento*, precisely because it was a new kind of relationship outside those bonds that were already part of the patriarchal system: family, work colleagues, and friendship. In the common understanding of friendship, its reason for being is located in a less focussed and more benign place than political comradeship, which is what is so important about alliances and *affidamento*.

HR: Can we return to the alliances in Sydney that you explore in your film downstairs. Can you remind us of the groups and the differences?

AMR: The key groupings in that story are the university students, the Builders Labourers Federation, a radical union of builders' labourers, the Aboriginal Rights movement, social housing activists, conservationists, and women's and gay liberation. So, it was a really broad spectrum of different movements that came together in these alliances.

The alliance that I focus on in the film is the Philosophy Strike in 1973. The students went on strike at Sydney University because a proposed course of feminist philosophy

was vetoed by the academic board. It was the first course on feminist philosophy taught there, when it was eventually accepted as a result of the strike. Part of the reason for that strike's success was that the Builders Labourers Federation put what they call a "green ban" on all building works at Sydney University. So, none of the university's building projects could resume until the feminist philosophy course was reinstated. That's not the only thing that made the strike successful, but it just interested me, the idea of labourers in hardhats campaigning for women's philosophy!⁵ Actually, the Builders Labourers Federation had joined up with the women's movement already, and quite a few female builders' labourers were feminist activists. The question I'm departing from in the workshop that's starting here tomorrow is to think about how we can generate these kinds of alliances without reducing the specificity of the political projects of those who take part.

HR: Something that comes out of this for me is the idea that thinking, writing theory, or making art can also be activist activities. You don't separate working to rule



Alex Martinis Roe, *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective*, film still of a photograph by Meredith Burgmann, 2017.



Alex Martinis Roe, *It Was About Opening The Very Notion That There Was A Particular Perspective*, film still of a production shot from Elizabeth Shaffer, Margot Nash, Wendy Brady, Donna Foster, and Vic Smith, *Bread and Dripping* (Sydney: Wimminsfilm, 1981), 2017.

or going on strike from teaching or writing a book of philosophy. These can all be forms of working towards liberation and challenging oppressive social forms.

AMR: Yes, they all produce futures, although in different temporalities.

Genealogies

HR: Another strain of thought that you're interested in concerns genealogies. How do ideas spread, become contagious, bring in fellow travellers who then head off elsewhere, geographically, intellectually, politically, to develop something in new contexts?

AMR: Yes, my broad motivation with *To Become Two* has been to create a social history of certain related feminist concepts and practices, partly as an antidote to the normative effect of publishing conventions and the way theory is often not situated by detailed information about the context within which it has been developed. I have noticed that the transversality of feminist philosophy and its disciplinary framing has largely come at the price of a rich understanding of the way these ideas often arose through collective experience and dialogue in the women's movement. *To Become Two* explores my own feminist formation and the key ideas that shaped my politics through a direct engagement with the communities within which they came about. I have sought out the history of the relationships and practices that formed them. For subsequent generations, the name of the author is not often remembered alongside the names of many others who were in conversation with that author, who to some extent co-authored the ideas. It is not the pursuit of recognition of minor voices in and of itself that motivates me though, it is about pursuing a relational model of authorship and thus selfhood, appropriate to those feminist ideas and contributing to the futures they hope to bring about. Genealogies of those relationships and collaborations build momentum, collecting the transformative force of more and more feminist actions. This fosters transgenerational solidarity and greater social change, because knowledge of what has gone before enables us to inherit the futures they laid the foundations for.

Feminist New Materialism

HR: One genealogy you've been exploring is feminist new materialism. Maybe that's not a concept or a criti-

cal framework that everybody here is familiar with. Can you tell us what you think it is and why it's a powerful and relevant body of thought?

AMR: First, we should problematize the term. I use "feminist new materialism," because it's a shorthand for a current that is gaining some visibility in feminist theory internationally. And it's not a new thing, it's been around since the '80s, basically.

HR: Where would you trace it back to?

AMR: I'm tracing it back to Elizabeth Grosz, of course, because I'm her big fan, but she doesn't like the term "new materialism," because it doesn't account for the importance of immaterial forces in thinking the universe. Rosi Braidotti also calls it "feminist posthumanism." It has quite a few different names, and it's not at all homogenous. And I think that's why the name is so difficult, because it encompasses a range of strategies and positions. One factor that joins them on some level is that they're all theories of difference. Another is that they combine discourses from the sciences and the humanities to examine, rework, and explode the nature-culture binary. So, they're looking at a range of different violences in our world and tracing them to this habit in Western philosophy and culture which separates nature from culture. So, racism, sexism, capitalism all stem from this nature-culture split. Why do I think that's so interesting? Because it is a tool for alliance. Because it examines how so many different structures in our world are interconnected. Like how climate change is a political, environmental, and a feminist issue. I also think it's useful in feminist discourse because it's a bridging discourse. The reason I focus on tracing its relationship to sexual difference feminism is because it is already a bridge into gender discourse and Trans theory and a range of other discourses. And it does that without betraying the key concepts or values of any of those discourses.

Mutability of Gender and Sex

HR: Let's use the Trans example, because that's, obviously, such an area of current struggle and exploration. And it's also something that some parts of the feminist movement have struggled to deal with. How might the kind of approach you've outlined relate to the idea that gender is permeable or porous?



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film stills of *Proposition #3 – Architectures for Encounter*, developed with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga, 2016.

AMR: My favourite example of this is Elizabeth Grosz’s work on Darwin. Most feminism is based on the premise that gender is socially constructed, and thus women should not be determined by sex. Commonly, there is a generalisation that sex is somehow fixed, that there’s two options and that’s it and it’s always going to be like that. And, further, that it is possible for gender to be constructed differently, because it is social and not natural.

Grosz takes Darwin, who you would, potentially, think of as the enemy of feminism framed like this, because his work on biology has been used by biological determinists. Grosz explores how, actually, in Darwin’s work, sex is understood as a process of differentiation. She uses the example of his extensive research on barnacles and how their sexes have evolved.⁶

He found specimens of barnacles that are hermaphroditic, as well as ones that are in transition between being hermaphroditic and being male and being female. And there are females with male parasites, and then there’s male and female. And they coexist, they’re the same species, but the barnacles have many sexes, which have evolved differently over time. Grosz explains how this research contributes to an understanding of sexual selection as, actually, the motor of natural selection: the process by which differences are proliferated, from which natural selection then selects.

The implications of that are quite phenomenal, because sexual selection, of course, is something that is intimately interconnected with cultural practices. However you choose to present yourself is designed to attract. So, a woman who wears her hair short, that’s because she’s trying to attract someone who desires that, and wearing her hair short produces a desire for that in other people. The effect of practices of sexual selection, which are usually deemed cultural, do impact upon the evolution

of the species. Over time, as certain breast sizes or beard shapes are selected, they become more prevalent in the species. Surgical alterations, too, affect desire and thus impact the evolution of our species. It is not possible to understand human evolution separate from our technologies. They are inextricable from our survival story and thus no body can be rightly conceived of in a “natural” state apart from those technologies which have actually ensured the organism’s survival and contributed to the way in which it attracts others with which to generate differences: the motor of evolution.

I think that opens up huge potential for understanding the agency of bodies, because you’re no longer thinking about bodies as cultural constructions on top of natural, fixed givens, but rather it’s like a flow. That gives the meat of our bodies a certain agency, doesn’t it? And, I think that that is, certainly, a feminist project and also an anti-racist one that is in alliance with Trans politics and its fight for gender non-conformity to be recognised and respected as real, embodied difference.

Spaces of Intimacy

HR: When viewing *Our Future Network* in advance of tonight’s event, one thing that struck me was how much time the film gives to intimate, unspectacular activities, like women talking to each other, sitting outside, or writing in their notebooks. This attention to relational intimacy resonates with an aspect of the project that I particularly appreciated, which was your collaboration with Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Every time we visited the cafeteria during the workshop, Fotini had rearranged the tables and chairs to set up different social encounters. Sometimes you found yourself at a long table, sometimes you sat at a round table, sometimes you were only able to sit across from one other person.



Alex Martinis Roe, *A story from Circolo della rosa*, film still of a photograph by P. H. Vanda-Vergna, courtesy of the Milan Women's Bookstore co-operative archive, 2014.

This everyday organisation of space and mise-en-scène really matters, although it's not usually foregrounded in politicised discussions.

AMR: That was an amazing collaboration with Fotini. *Our Future Network* started out with a seventeen-week workshop in my studio in Berlin, and for that workshop I wanted to generate a space that had as much care in it as the spaces that I was admiring. There's this great bit in the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's book about their transition from the closed *autocoscienza* groups (where a small number of women met to talk in their private apartments) to having a public space.⁷

HR: More of an institution.

AMR: Yes, the bookshop being a feminist institution in a way that the *autocoscienza* groups weren't. In that transition phase, they couldn't quite work out why they weren't able to practise their politics in the same way in this new public context. They had become so good at their specific relational practices in their intimate private groups and in their one-on-one relationships of *affidamento*, but it wasn't working in the larger more formal group setting. They found present in that space the same, destructive relational habits that had led them to quit the leftist groups they had been in and form their own separatist, feminist ones.

One of the reasons that they identified for that was a lack of care for the shared space. So, they would say, okay, in our apartments where we had met for the *autocoscienza* groups, they're loved and cared for spaces,

and so we cared for each other and our language there. Whereas in these collective spaces, they were rundown, and nobody was really making them nice, because they didn't feel a particular responsibility for them. So, that was reflected in the speech that was spoken there.

In all of the long-lasting groups that I spent time with for the research, I noticed that they did take care of their common spaces. So, I thought, okay, I've got to generate one of these spaces, how am I going to design it? And I wanted, with not too much money, to adapt my studio into a space that would be conducive to the kinds of experiments that we would be doing there.

So, I asked Fotini if she would work on that for me, and we did that. So, then the initial *Our Future Network* workshop took place there, and when it came time, a year later, to make the film, Fotini and I worked on the props and the mise-en-scène and how to generate the film set/workshop space. What was it going to look like on camera, but then also, how does it feel to be in? It was therefore only natural that this was a Proposition in itself. And the exhibition, too. It was important that exhibition should be presented with the same care as another of these discursive spaces.

HR: I like the idea that some things that we might not take very seriously, like how we put effort to making our homes comfortable and pleasant for oneself and visitors, are valuable activities. This body of knowledge, and practice of creating environments, has political implications, and should be taken seriously and valued.

Public Speaking

HR: I remember you talking about how the group that formed during the workshop in your Berlin studio developed a particular relationship to speech. Can you tell us about how you developed exercises that involved giving each other feedback following public talks and other discursive experiments?

AMR: Yes, our practical research into feminist public speaking that resulted in *Proposition #6 – The Practice of (Public) Speaking* was done over quite a long period of time. We agreed that public speaking was something through which you could diagnose a whole lot of things about your techniques of self, and also where the demands of patriarchal structures clearly manifest themselves. So, as a kind of feminist psychoanalytic tool, it was something we could really work on. And it is also a frequent task of self-formation and self-representation, like right now, I'm speaking publicly. So, the question we grappled with was how to practically work on the way that we talk so as to change the way that we listen to and see each other.

After a couple of months of this group research into public speaking, we undertook an observation experiment. One person from the group would attend another group member's public speaking engagement and observe her performance. So, in my case, Valerie Terwei came to observe the way that I contributed to an internal Universität der Künste Berlin Graduate School planning meeting, where I was a fellow at the time. At the beginning of the meeting, I had to explain the experiment to the everyone and ask their permission, which was weird, "Do you mind, my collaborator needs to analyse my public speaking in this situation." Of course, that then changed the dynamic. We did lots of experiments like that. We found these observational exercises an incredibly rich practice, because, first of all, this person was, immediately, a support. So, it gave you confidence, as soon as you were on stage or in the spotlight because you had an ally, someone who was there not to appease you, but to help you. And then the feedback itself was incredible, because it was very honest and we'd really committed to this process, so it wasn't congratulatory out of politeness. It also wasn't tips on how to make your public speaking better, it was more focussed on analysing how we each made space for ourselves publicly and what sense of selfhood we were forming and projecting through those habits. I must say that I think we all became way more confident



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #6 – The Practice of (Public) Speaking*, developed with Cécile Bally, 2016.

at public speaking and more confident in general through this process, which had a really long-lasting impact, at least for me.

Curatorial Collaboration

HR: It would be interesting to hear about the curatorial collaboration with the various curators and institutional partners who you worked with on the exhibition, and the implications of this support structure for feminist practice.

AMR: The curatorial collaboration with *If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*, Casco Art Institute (then Casco - Office for Art, Design and Theory), The Showroom, and ar/ge kunst came about because I had multiple separate invitations, and as the project was so large and needed a lot of support, I proposed bringing them together. At first, there was the idea that each institution might support a separate part of the project and in reality, it did actually work that way, but the partners decided that it was better to jointly commission the whole thing. I had been working on the project for a couple of years before this, but it was incredibly transformative to have a network of feminists and feminist organisations behind it. The collaboration

among the four institutions as well as Archive Books (who were involved from the very beginning of the research) was fantastic in that it presented a non-competitive and collaborative approach to curatorial support for art practice that went beyond just staging exhibitions. Casco and If I Can't Dance in particular were involved in sustaining the research and development of the work over a number of years. Rather than the usual short-term engagement artists have with institutions, I became an ongoing member of each workplace. It began when Casco facilitated the research and production of one of the films, initially through a performance work co-presented by If I Can't Dance in 2014 as part of *Performance Days*. The collaboration with those two institutions only came to an end in 2018 when my book *To Become Two: Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice* (Berlin and Milan: Archive Books, 2018) was published and distributed, so we had worked together regularly for around four years. In particular, Susan Gibb from If I Can't Dance took on the role of producer of the *Our Future Network* film and, through the intensity of our collaboration, we forged a very close dialogue on all aspects of the project. She's an exceptionally talented and dedicated curator who played a really big role in the work's development. The real engagement of these curators (especially Binna Choi and Jason Waite at Casco; Susan Gibb and Frédérique Bergholz at If I Can't Dance; but also Staci Bu Shea at Casco; Emanuele Guidi at *arge kunst*; Emily Pethick and Eva Rowson at The Showroom; and Chiara Figone and Paolo Caffoni at Archive Books) in the project itself and their commitment to its development over such a long period of time was a true enactment of the politics my project was concerned with and testament to the rigour with which they practise curatorship as feminist politics.

Role of the Camera

HR: The workshop proposed the idea that objects have a contagious effect. In some exercises, we passed around objects that had meaning for us. Passing them by hand, there was a certain kind of molecular transmission.

AMR: Yes, totally.

HR: So, maybe actor network theory is in there, how objects, be they human objects or ideas as objects, have agency.

AMR: Also the film itself.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Their desire rang through the halls and into the tower*, film still of a VHS recording of Cris van der Hoek's "Playback Show" based on her thesis *Een bewuste paria. Hannah Arendt en de feministische filosofie* (2000), Courtesy of Cris van der Hoek and Rosemarie Buikema, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Their desire rang through the halls and into the tower*, 2016. Commissioned by Casco Art Institute in collaboration with If I Can't Dance I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution's *Performance Days*, 2014.

HR: You talk about the potentiality of the past, the virtual and the potential.

AMR: Yes, at the moment that you tell a story, you are performing the virtualities in that story and making them actual to a certain degree. So, it's the fact that I was telling these stories about these groups has made some of their practices actually happen again. The method of telling the stories also becomes the method of doing the practices. We were doing it for ourselves, in our own way, while at the same time living the stories we were telling.

Audience Questions

Audience Member 1: It seems that you're using a structure that challenges us to think about how we come together in what I would call structures of intimacy, and the way we might rethink a type of caring whose purposes are political or could be politicised. I'm thinking

of those intimate moments where you get together for a reading group, or you have people over for dinner, or you look after kids together. I come from a rural background, so I keep relating it back to rural dynamics, where people came together out of necessity to help each other out and take care of each other.

AMR: Yes, totally. That's a great way of talking about it. It's so important that we see politics as something people can do in their everyday lives, rather than as this big insurmountable thing that they'd have to give up their day job to do. These feminist histories showed me how embedded politics is in everyday life. How easy it is. You don't need many resources to undertake a meaningful relationship with somebody else, that's really your decision.

Audience Member 2: You spoke you spoke about trust and love as a commitment of time. I'm trying to imagine how much time the projects reflected in the show downstairs actually all took, which seem to involve processes that are opposite of working fast.

AMR: Yes, the workshop in my studio in Berlin was seventeen weeks, and then the group continued working together for a year before the Our Future Network meet-

ing. And that is only one of the six projects downstairs. I have been working on *To Become Two* for over four years, and the meaningful relationships that constitute it took time to build. But then I've also been astounded at what can occur in a short period. It is amazing what can happen among strangers in just one afternoon. In our workshop here during Now You Can Go, a lot happened in just two days. But, certainly, for it to have a lasting effect it takes time. The bookshop co-operative in Milan that so inspires me has been going for over forty years. What I found so amazing was that it had lasted that long, and they were still doing their politics of relationships.

Audience Member 3: I was wondering about the editing process and how the film is cut and then, maybe also related to time, how you construct the time or the film in relation to the time of watching?

AMR: The editing process was already planned like narrative cinema. So, even though there was only ever one take of anything, which makes it a documentary in some respects, it was planned to a very tight degree. So, in four days, in which we must've been active for over twelve hours a day, we only had eleven hours of film footage. And I kind of knew that it would be roughly



Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two*, installation detail, Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, 2017. Exhibition design: Fotini Lazaridou-Hatzigoga. Photo: Stephen Bauman, bild_raum.

that much in advance. So, that was already a process of editing that happened in the design of the project at the beginning. There was a dialogue about when the camera would be on and off in each of the parts of each of these propositions and exercises. And also where the camera would be. We had rules for each proposition, like for example, that the camera can't be on faces, only on hands during this exercise. Or, in this part, we're going to be far away, so the camera can't hear what's being said. Cinematographer Smina Bluth and I also developed a "feminist gaze" for the camera, too. It started from Smina's own positionality along with the rest of the all-female film crew and their participation in it, rather than recording it from a position outside. Then it was also about dignity and finding ways to foreground the beauty and self-determination of each contributor, as well as the desire among them. There were a whole range of parameters in place, designed primarily for political reasons. And then when it came time for editing, I already knew beforehand that I wanted it to be structured as a toolbox. So, in a way, editing it into these little episodes meant that it's eighteen mini films. All the contributors knew that I would be directing and editing, but that there would be an opportunity for consultation in the editing process. Once I had a rough cut, everyone got to watch that and make comments. There were a few changes here and there that came out of that process. I worked with Anne Jünemann on the edit. She's an incredible editor, and it was an amazing experience working with her. She and I totally fell in love with the contributors as we were editing the film every day for months afterwards. It was wonderful.

Notes

- 1 *Now You Can Go* was a programme developed by Angelica Bolletinari, Giulia Casalini, Diana Georgiou, Laura Guy, Helena Reckitt, Irene Revell and Amy Tobin across several London arts spaces, in 2015, exploring the contemporary resonance of second wave Italian feminisms. See Helena Reckitt "Generating Feminisms: Italian Feminisms and the 'Now You Can Go' Program, *Art Journal*, 2017, 76:3-4
- 2 Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- 3 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Recovering Identity Politics from Neoliberalism," interview with Daniel Denvir, *The Dig* podcast from *Jacobin Magazine*, 19 December 2017, last accessed 12 February 2021, <https://www.thedigradio.com/podcast/keeanga-yamahtta-taylor-recovering-identity-politics-from-neoliberalism/>.
- 4 Sasha Roseneil, "Foregrounding Friendship: Feminist Past, Feminist Futures," in *Handbook of Gender and Women's Studies*, eds. Kathy Davis, Mary Evans, Judith Lorber (London: Sage, 2006), 340
- 5 "Green bans" were called so because the Builders Labourers Federation had put a halt to a number of major developments in Sydney because of their threat to green spaces. The strength of the union meant that the builders labourers' refusal to work on projects that were environmentally or socially undesirable to the community were, for a time, largely successful strike actions.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of *Proposition #20 – The Practice of Acknowledgement*, developed by all the contributors to *Our Future Network*. 2016.

6 Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

7 Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, trans. Patricia Cicogna, Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 83.

Alex Martinis Roe is an artist and researcher working with film installation, events, and publications on feminist genealogies, seeking to foster relations between different generations and positions as a way of participating in the construction of feminist histories and futures. Her project *To Become Two* (2014-2018) was co-commissioned as a cycle of solo exhibitions by If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution, NL, Casco Art Institute, NL, The Showroom, UK, and ar/ge kunst, IT. It is currently on show at Samstag Museum, AU, and was also shown at Badischer Kunstverein, DE, and presented at the Centre Georges Pompidou, FR, as part of *Mai 68 – Assemblée Générale* (2018). She was the 2018 recipient of the Future of Europe Art Prize, and work from her current project *Alliances* (2018 - ongoing) has been exhibited at GfZK - Museum of Contemporary Art Leipzig (solo, 2018), Frac Lorraine, Metz (2018), and in *1 Million Roses for Angela Davis*, Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau, Dresden (2020-2021). She was a fellow at Graduiertenschule UdK Berlin (2013-2016) and is currently Head of Drawing and Printmaking at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne.

Currently Reader in Curating in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, **Helena Reckitt** has worked as a curator, a public programmer, and an academic editor in the UK, Canada, and the US. She has developed exhibitions, public events, and discursive programmes for organisations including the ICA, London; the Atlanta Contemporary Art Centre, Georgia; and the Power Plant and Nuit Blanche in Toronto. With a longstanding interest in feminist art, writing, and collective practice, since 2015 she has coordinated the Feminist Duration Reading Group, which meets each month to explore under-recognised feminisms. She has recently completed an MA in Creative and Life Writing at Goldsmiths, and is applying approaches from life writing to her academic and curatorial essays.

The Art of Getting Organized. A Different Approach to Old Boys Network Cornelia Sollfrank

*If the past insists, it is because of life's unavoidable demand
to activate in the present the seeds of its buried futures.*
— Walter Benjamin, *Psychography*

More than a decade after the Old Boys Network (OBN) ceased its work, I was invited to look back and reflect on the cyberfeminist network that was active from 1997 to 2001. This was in 2013, and I used it as an opportunity to think about our internal organizational structure.¹ As expressed in the motto “the mode is the message,” we understood our way of working (together) as an important contribution to cyberfeminist practice, and my lecture was an attempt to trace the dynamics of this collaboration.

Building on my thoughts from 2013, I would like to go beyond the internal structure and take a closer look at the underlying dynamics. Therefore, it is less the macropolitical manifestations of OBN that interest me in this text, but rather the spirit of the time, the vibes and the affects that brought us together in the first place and kept the process going for more than five years. This other side of politics allows a new and different perspective on OBN, one which has not been paid much attention to before—not by us at the time, but also not by its successors who had no chance to learn about it.

Related to this aspect of micropolitical currents is the entanglement of art and politics. Where and how did politics meet aesthetics in this formation? Getting organized, networking, and building relations were central to our understanding of cyberfeminism. However, OBN was not just a platform whose objective was to organize an existing context but rather played an important role in the emergence of a whole new field. This quality of a structure that brings to life what did not exist before, while at the same time being itself in a constant process of transformation and becoming—as was the case with OBN—does not help to win political battles in the traditional sense. It nevertheless creates ever new imaginaries, and, with them agencies and agents. Olga Goriunova² describes such processes of mutual shaping as “organizational aesthetics,” a concept that links questions of organization, which are political in nature, to aesthetics as the interface between the world and an emerging subjectivity.

OBN's Trajectory

The Old Boys Network described itself as “the first international cyberfeminist alliance.”³ Founded in 1997, the connecting element of the network was the term “cyberfeminism.” The formulated concern of the organization was “to create spaces in which cyberfeminists can research, experiment, communicate and act. Such spaces include virtual ones such as the cyberfeminist server and the <oldboys> mailing list as well as temporary meetings such as workshops and international conferences. All the activities have the purpose of providing a contextualized presence for different artistic, theoretical

and political formulations related to cyberfeminism. At times mysterious, at times transparent, OBN is setting an agenda for communication, intervention and production.”⁴

The use of the term cyberfeminism was a tactical appropriation by OBN. Introduced in 1991, Sadie Plant had promoted it in the context of cultural theory, while the Australian artist collective VNS Matrix had used it as an inspiration for their poetic and visually stunning artworks. What both approaches had in common, however, was a kind of techno-deterministic assumption that there was a special connection between the characteristics of digitally networked technology and the “feminine.” While Plant pursued such an essentialist approach, in which the transformation into a new social order was to take place virtually at the click of a mouse, VNS Matrix’s poetic effusions from and about the female body and its connection to cyberspace always came with a wink. Their feminization of digital society took place through the contamination of sterile technology with blood, sperm, pussies, and madness, which would be enough to desecrate the toys for boys forever with its anarchic power...

Clearly, this new discourse on digital technology with a special emphasis on gender aspects ushered in a new era. The time was ripe to throw overboard old prejudices regarding gender-specific handling of technology. However, questioning the alleged bond between women and nature and between men and technology should provide more options than simply replacing one essentialism with another one. This is where OBN came into play—with the idea of diversifying early cyberfeminism and using its underlying affects to build a fluid context. Gender would not just be associated with male and female but understood as a technology in itself; technological development would equally be understood as plastic in the sense of possibly having contradictory effects depending on social relations and the context of their use. And all these new opportunities were pervaded by desires that yet had to be explored, one of them being to understand digital technology as an environment for thinking and working together, and as an occasion for creating something new.

OBN set out to create confusion regarding a definition of cyberfeminism. In fact, we wanted cyberfeminism to mean different things to different people, with our main objective being to create a platform on which they all could live *with* each other and *next* to each other. It was an invitation to take things in one’s own hands, a moment of activation instead of following someone’s footsteps, gaining ownership of one’s own feelings and needs. But it was about opportunities to find out what responses the time required instead of repeating established patterns of engagement, about active involvement in the uncertainty of the new. With the diversity came the threat of an infinite multiplication of meaning, which was not frightening for those who had agreed to the expressed rule of different contents and the unspoken rule of common forms. At the time, cyberfeminism was mainly a projection field to trigger all kinds of fantasies, new imaginaries, to produce desires about genders and technologies. For this purpose, it was a necessary evil to have a term that suggested a political will and orientation. It seduced people into an organization for the exploration of what was not there yet.

One or More Temporary Collectives

The impulse to found OBN originated from an invitation to participate in the Hybrid Workspace⁵ in Kassel in 1997. My previous work with the artist groups women-and-technology and -Innen had brought me in touch with the international scene of media activists who got the opportunity to use the temporary media lab during the 100 days of *documenta X* in 1997. Ten groups were invited to work, discuss, present, and publish as part of the world’s largest exhibition for contemporary art. This opportunity asked

for the launch of a new initiative that would be able to complement tactical media activism with gender-related issues, to counter the male-dominated digital underground and hacker culture and come up with an experimental approach of combining (gender-)political issues with aesthetic strategies.

OBN was founded in Berlin⁶ in early summer 1997, and the idea was born to use the invitation to Kassel to hold the *First Cyberfeminist International*.⁷ From the very beginning, we placed great emphasis on our organizational form, which should remain flexible while at the same time enabling us to adhere to certain principles. The slogan “The Mode is the Message – the Code is the Collective!” was representative of our attitude to consider an awareness of the conditions of production (and presentation) as an important part of the quality of a work, which made it essential to develop our own structures and forms of organization. Codifying the rules as part of the FAQ on our website made this transparent and functioned as an invitation to join in, discuss, and co-design the structure. In retrospect, it is obvious that it was impossible to codify all the rules—and maybe even not desirable, as many just evolved implicitly. Something always remained open, a state of not knowing exactly what OBN was and how it worked, which was an essential aspect of the organization’s appeal.

As for the first conference in Kassel, OBN decided to publish an open call and possibly invite everyone to participate who had suggested their personal approach to cyberfeminism. Thirty-six positions were presented under the motto “Targeting Content: Cyberfeminism.” We succeeded in producing a small opening into the curatorial machine of the world’s most prestigious contemporary art exhibition, allowing many cyberfeminists to participate without a judgmental selection process.⁸ To capture the spirit of the moment, we co-authored and published the *100 Anti-Theses* that describe what cyberfeminism is *not*. The manifesto expresses the agreement within OBN not to provide a general definition of cyberfeminism while, at the same time, committing ourselves to the shared form of this manifesto. This could be understood as the general agreement of OBN: a common form that not only allows, but demands, diversity in content.

The conference had been organized by the five founding members of OBN but right after the conference, personnel changes began with old members leaving and new ones joining in—a process that would continue to the end. The various forms of participation and collaboration made it necessary to think about models of affiliation. A so-called core group of eight was formed.⁹ It declared itself responsible for organizational and administrative tasks and saw itself as the nucleus of the international network of associated members. After the second international conference held in Rotterdam in 1999, the organizational structure shifted again and replaced the “core group and network” model to an association of different working groups. In the five years OBN was active, three international conferences were organized in different constellations.¹⁰ Conference proceedings were published in three printed readers, there were numerous appearances in form of lectures and presentations at international festivals and conferences, and OBN contributed to exhibitions and publications.¹¹ A total of about 180 people were actively involved in OBN at different times and with different intensities. Although they all identified themselves as cyberfeminists—following their own definitions—it remained unclear to many how to characterize their affiliation to OBN. There was no formal membership status, but everyone who had a sense of belonging was part of it. And it was part of the unspoken politics of OBN to operate on two levels, a visible and understandable organizational structure that, however, shifted regularly, and a co-existing and undefined state of belonging that kept things in limbo.

Starting in the Middle

In the context of the newly aroused interest in cyberfeminism, a critic accused OBN in 2017 of having generated “a cyberfeminism without a sense of direction and without a collective purpose—a position in which little appears possible in terms of working cooperatively to effectuate change or to extend capacities for meaningful action,” and continued that “this created barriers in terms of thinking beyond the individual in order to make collective demands, and thereby worked to shape and constrain cyberfeminism’s horizons of possibility.”¹² Such judgment assumes an understanding of politics that subsumes people under common goals and reduces meaningful action to marching in the same direction. The following quote by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari may help to identify the source of the mis-/non-understanding: “Those who evaluated things in macropolitical terms understood nothing of the event, because something unaccountable was escaping.”¹³ It is true that OBN never formulated a political agenda and never claimed to be a movement in the classical sense, for the reason that our understanding of politics did not focus on adaptation but on activation. OBN produced its unity and relevance on a level that was not perceivable from the distance, as a banner. Instead, it required involvement and a sense of connection to the field in order to perceive the driving forces underneath the surface.

Using the term “cyberfeminism” with its all too obvious connotations and, at the same time, refusing to define it, indicated this line of flight from the sphere of formalized politics. It signalled the move to a different territory, filled with the desire to accept disagreement within a framework of trust, thus allowing difference and promoting mutual understanding. This structure concatenated heterogeneous elements as a way of collective becoming, in a context where the joy of empowerment coexists with the unease caused by the uncontrollability of digital technology.

Sharing both the joy and the unease was what OBN enabled without prescribing which direction to go. And it was built on these affects that never remain private but permeate society where they manifest themselves as driving forces, usually under the wrong name. “The private is the political,”¹⁴ as Friedrich Balke paraphrases the cross-over of political territory described by Deleuze and Guattari, a proclamation that the philosophers nonetheless failed to credit to the feminist contexts out of which it had emerged a decade earlier. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of micropolitics means neither politics in miniature nor the actions of individuals as opposed to the big picture. The term aims at the multitude of interacting movements that permeate the social field, or at collective structures and associations that are real without being representative.

This is the challenge when looking back to an organization that was not one but remained variable and responded both to the needs of its ever-changing members and to the issues at stake. This shapeshifting—between a network, a group, a temporary collective, a structure, an infrastructure, or a dust cloud—and the elusiveness that comes with it contributed to OBN’s aura, which continued to attract new people whose engagement kept the organization in transition. What appears as the past returns today as a possible way into the future.

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Notes

- 1** “Cyberfeminist Ways of Getting Organized,” University of the Arts Berlin, lecture series “Art and Gender,” organized by Judith Siegmund, April 2013. Available in German at: <http://artwarez.org/195.0.html>
- 2** Goriunova, Olga, *Organizational Aesthetics: Art Platforms and Cultural Production on the Internet*, Routledge, 2012.
- 3** See the archived website of OBN at: www.obn.org
- 4** Quote from the FAQ on the website of OBN
- 5** Archive: <http://medialounge.waag.org/lounge/workspace/index.html> and https://monoskop.org/Hybrid_Workspace
- 6** The founding members were Susanne Ackers, Vali Djordjevic, Ellen Nonnenmacher, Julianne Pierce and Cornelia Sollfrank.
- 7** <https://www.obn.org/kassel/>
- 8** For the program see the web archive at: <https://www.obn.org/kassel/>. In 1998 a reader was published, which documented the *first Cyberfeminist International* (also available online).
- 9** The members were Susanne Ackers, Verena Kuni, Helene von Oldenburg, Julianne Pierce, Helene von Oldenburg, Claudia Reiche, Cornelia Sollfrank, Yvonne Volkart and Faith Wilding.
- 10** *first Cyberfeminist International*, documenta10, Hybrid Workspace, 1997. *next Cyberfeminist International*, Rotterdam, in coordination with n5m Amsterdam, Festival for Tactical Media, 1999. *very Cyberfeminist International*, Hamburg, as part of the EU-funded collaboration between the Edith-Russ-Site for Media Art in Oldenburg and the Frauen.Kultur.Labor Thealit in Bremen, which also included the exhibition *Cyberfem Spirit* (Helene von Oldenburg and Rosanne Altstadt) and the symposium *Technics of Cyberfeminism* in Bremen (Claudia Reiche, Andrea Sick).
- 11** For details visit the website where all events and participants are documented.
- 12** Hester, Helen, “After the Future: *n* Hypotheses of Post-Cyber Feminism,” 2017. Available at: <https://beingres.org/2017/06/30/afterthefuture-helenhester/>
- 13** Deleuze, Gilles / Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, p. 238.
- 14** Balke, Friedrich, *Gilles Deleuze*, Reihe Campus, 1998.

Cornelia Sollfrank (PhD) is an artist, researcher, and university lecturer living in Berlin (Germany). Recurring subjects in her artistic and academic work in and about digital cultures are artistic infrastructures, new forms of (political) self-organization, authorship and intellectual property, and techno-feminist practice and theory. As a pioneer of Internet art, Cornelia Sollfrank built up a reputation with two central projects: the net.art generator—a web-based art-producing machine—and Female Extension—her famous hack of the first competition for Internet art. Her experiments with the basic principles of aesthetic modernism implied conflicts with its institutional and legal framework and led to her academic research. In her PhD “Performing the Paradoxes of Intellectual Property,” Cornelia investigated the increasingly conflicting relationship between art and copyright. This led to her current research project “Creating Commons,” based at the University of the Arts in Zurich. Her most recent artistic work, the performance *À la recherche de l’information perdue*, is about gender stereotypes in the digital underground with the example of Wikileaks.

The artistic research group #purplenoise, co-founded in 2018, investigates the potential of social media for political manipulation. Recent publications include “The beautiful Warriors. Technofeminist Practice in the 21st Century” (minorcompositions.org), “Aesthetics of the Commons” (diaphanes.net) and “Fix My Code” (with Winnie Soon) (e eclectic.de)—all open access.

Homepage: artwarez.org

Mestiza Consciousness and *Sentipensamiento*—Ontologies for a Feminist Instituting

Berit Fischer

We must learn to listen.

We must learn to feel.

To feel:

the soul of things,

the touch of words, the pace of essence, the symphony of the total Being.

– Juan Cepeda H.¹

Debates and pursuits for a “new institutionalism,”² institutional critique, and for institutions of critique have existed since the 1970s. Questions of how to overcome institutional structural power relations, internalised rules and norms, the understanding of a work of art as a mere object, and the whole institutional framework that comes with it, have been some of the central questions in these deliberations. How to achieve an emancipated institutionalism that moves beyond the demands of the neoliberal event economy and that seeks a profound structural change away from a criticality *about* something, but towards an activated, embodied, and experiential critique? Can a move away from a static institutionalism be imagined, towards an active and processual “instituting” that challenges the representational exhibition format, and a mediated informational curatorial knowledge production that merely reproduces existing relations, and that is rooted in the rational of a passive “spectator witness”?³ A striving towards a “feminist instituting”?

“Feminist instituting” is understood throughout this text as a collective agreement and cooperation, an incomplete and continuous process of becoming, of endlessly changing social interactions and improvisations. An instituting that lies within feminist epistemologies and ontologies of “in-corporating” an experiential, immediate, and embodied shifting of critical thinking towards new directions that might resist and challenge dominant and institutionalised narratives. A feminist instituting that understands the micro level and the body as a site of practice, of becoming and of potentiality; as the starting point for an “active micropolitics”⁴ and for “embodied critique.”

Philosopher Marina Garcés offers thought on embodied critique as a critique away from the “artist-intellectual” and away from techniques of critique *about* the world: “To embody critique means to ask how to subvert one’s life nowadays in such a way that the world can no longer remain the same.”⁵ An embodied critique to overcome what she calls the “impotence” that has been caused by late neoliberal capitalism’s manipulations, its changing of social relations and capacities of connecting:

No one is sure of where they are: connections, personal and non-transferable, are inseparable from the threat of dis-connection. For this reason, this new social contract converts us into producers and reproducers of reality, in knots that strengthen the network: established unilaterally through each person. This network obligates through self-obligation, controls through self-control, represses through self-repression.⁶

This “social contract” is driven by neoliberal capitalism’s deferral of systemic responsibility to, for example, that of individual problem-solving and is based on the logic of separationism that demands self-commodification and self-representation: a logic of exteriority that is engraved also by social media. Spectatorship, observer, by-standing, and the outside view are qualities that today’s society is abundantly saturated with. For example, the spectatorship of sensational news reports, and ubiquitous media consumption, enhance the efforts of late cognitive and data capitalists to construct hyper individualism, separation, and apathy, emotional states that manipulate and alienate subjects from their own social and expressive efforts. A fertile ground to nourish post-truth narratives, symbolic violence, populist, right-wing, identarian, racist, sexist, and nationalist trends.

Humanity lives in a time of precarity, in precarious planetary and social existence that is governed by the rationale of power-seeking, exploitative neoliberal, data, and cognitive capitalism and its global commodification of life and nature. Not least the present Covid-19 zoonosis reveals the delicate vulnerabilities and deeply interwoven interdependencies of humanity and its co-existence with non-, or more-than-human, agents.

This precarious and highly charged political climate cries out for a fundamental socio-political and cultural shift that redefines the very nature of relationships with the Other—human and more-than-human alike.⁷ Such a reorientation encompasses the need for profound ontological and epistemological changes in curatorial and cultural practices and in forms of instituting: away from “neck-up” disembodied perception and critique, away from reactionary passive consumerism and spectatorship. We need a shift away from yet another intervention into debates on art and social/ecological justice, in which art is largely used as a “consciousness-raising tool” on a purely representative level.⁸ Instead, we require a shift towards a cultural and curatorial production of knowledge that is able to mobilise and to activate the theories and issues a stake, and that takes holistic experiential consciousness-raising to heart. Such a feminist instituting embraces practices of transdisciplinarity, embodiment, and situatedness, in order to engender profound structural and ontological change in the social relations that enable “instituting.” A redefining of forms of instituting towards processes of social activations that are entangled with pressing alternative imaginaries for a liveable life and co-existence with the natural world. An epistemology and ethics that call for a knowing and being *with* the world, that expand beyond closed margins of the “self,” that disrupt limiting binaries, and foster sharing and openness for pluriversal and polyvocal viewpoints and experiential criticality.

While acknowledging my privileged viewpoint of a white middle-class European cis-woman, I turn to foundational non-gendered feminist pedagogies, epistemologies, and practices that strive to connect theory to lived experience. Approaches that question heteronormative ways of knowing that are based on disembodied objectivity and that are anchored predominantly in a Cartesian rationalist, metrics-driven objectivity and neutrality. I am beholden to intellectual thinkers whose teachings



Radical Empathy Lab at *Making Futures School*, 2019, Berlin, Germany. I founded the *Radical Empathy Lab* in 2016 as an ongoing social and research laboratory for alternative and holistic knowledge production. Here I re-enact Lygia Clark's *Multisensorial Experiments*. Photograph by Gary Hurst. Courtesy of Gary Hurst.

Lygia Clark (1920-88) was a Brazilian constructivist artist (painting and sculpture) known from the 1960s and '70s who, along with artist Hélio Oiticica, is considered one of the leading artists of Brazil's *Neo Concrete* art movement (1959-61), which rejected a pure rationalist, representational, and scientific approach to concrete art and embraced a more phenomenological art that sought to be organic and subjective, a multi-sensorial experience that would make the spectators feel more aware of their bodily and organic existence. The multisensorial experiments were part of her late body of work *Estruturação do Self (Structuring the Self)*, 1976-1988. They sought to activate the non-visual and bodily awareness of Clark's participants with a motivation for healing and with a concern for psychotherapy.

recognise the urgency for multiple ways of knowing and being; they are vital inspirations in the pursuit of feminist instituting that questions dominant representations and that challenges capitalist logics, heteronormativity, racism, populism, and colonialism.

How to institute feminist curatorial spaces and conditions that recognise plural epistemologies and ways of knowing as sites of activism, collaboration, resistance, and transformation while centring on intersectionality and collectivity? How to create curatorial conditions for activating embodied experiential critical consciousness, to decolonise the subjugated subject, and to decolonise knowledge away from hegemonic instituting and the methodologies by which it is produced?

Interlude—Radical Empathy Lab

These are some of the questions that prompted me to establish the *Radical Empathy Lab (REL)* in 2016. *REL* moves through time and place as a question, a slogan, an intervention, as situations, actions, as affective encounter, and as a place that allows the laboratory to explore how to activate a micropolitical and holistic making of social empathy and as an approach to post-representational curation.

The *Radical Empathy Lab* is an ongoing social and research laboratory for alternative and holistic knowledge production that embraces relational—versus informational—learning, and what Brazilian theorist Suely Rolnik calls “the

knowing body.” It experiments with transdisciplinary holistic advances, in which the cognitive intertwines with the non-semiotic. The affective encounters involve its participants in idiosyncratic combinations of theory and alternative transdisciplinary activating techniques that might not only enrich their own imaginaries and cultural practice, but that invite experimentation with a cultural production beyond mere forms of representation.

The lab strives to emphasise and activate the reconnection to our sensing and knowing bodies, the sensual and experiential for creating critical consciousness and interconnectedness, and to sharpen our senses for an “active micropolitics” (Rolnik).

The *Radical Empathy Lab* explores new forms of being together that momentarily make it possible to reflect, to re-feel, and undo a reactionary an-aesthesia (Greek: *an-aesthēsis*: without sensation) that is often nurtured by neoliberal capitalism and by dominant, separationist, and systemic structures. By moving from singularity to collective activity, the lab investigates the relation between micro and macro dimensions of agency, as potential practices of freedom and self-empowerment that decolonise and de-subjectivate the (social) body and its relationality to the Other.⁹

Decolonisation is understood here as a phenomenological approach, in the sense of delinking from capitalistic appropriations in the process of subjectivation and in order to overcome and challenge hierarchical and binary realities of Othering and Otherness. Sociologist and legal scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos comments on the notion of colonialism as follows:

Colonialism did not end with the historical end of territorial occupation. Only its form changed. [...] Likewise, the term “decolonization” does not concern political independence alone, but rather an ample historical process of ontological restoration, that is, the recognition of knowledges and reconstruction of humanity.¹⁰

One of de Sousa Santos’s most renowned contributions to social theory and to the discourse on anti-hegemonial cognitive justice is his recognition of plural epistemologies, systems, and ways of knowing that extend beyond a Western understanding of the world, which he frames as “epistemologies of the South.” He argues for a decolonised “*mestizaje*” (Spanish: fusion, mixed, crossbreeding), “postabyssal, hybrid concepts and theories [...] in which the mixture of knowledges, cultures, subjectivities, and practices subverts the abyssal line that grounds the epistemologies of the North.”¹¹

In the search for “postabyssal,” hybrid alternative epistemological (re-)imaginings in cultural practices—away from a knowing *about* towards a “knowing with” (de Sousa Santos) or a “worlding with” (Haraway)—Indigenous epistemologies offer a source of hope and profound inspiration.

For example, the Indigenous Latin American ontological philosophical notions of “*corazonar*” and “*sentipensar*” are deeply encouraging for contemplating feminist instituting, and for methodological and philosophical frameworks for a curatorial practice that holistically and sustainably seeks to mobilise the theories and ideas at stake.

Colombian philosopher Juan Cepeda H. expresses the ontological sentiment of “*sentipensar*” as follows:

We must learn to listen.
We must learn to feel.

To feel:
the soul of things,
the touch of words, the pace of essence, the symphony of the total Being.
That is why the nature of *sentipensar* requires a connection *from the heart*
with nature as a whole; understanding the cosmos
with all its meanings and senses implies not a pure and simple reasoning
—only reasoning—
But a reasoning-with (with-everything-that-is and with-the-heart),
that is to say: to co-reason: *corazonar*.¹²

The notion of *sentipensamiento* was described (1984) by Orlando Fals Borda (1925-2008) as a living principle of Indigenous peasant communities of Colombia’s Caribbean coastline. Fals Borda was a Colombian sociologist and one of the founders of Participatory Action Research (PAR). *Sentipensar* translates to “feel-thinking” (from Spanish: *sentir*/feel and *pensar*/think) and implies the ways of knowing and being that are rooted in thinking with both heart and mind. The notion suggests a holistic thinking that does not separate the mind from the body, or emotion from reason; it implies an empathic knowledge that is in reciprocal intertwinement between learning and acting, and that by learning acts and by acting learns.

Fals Borda also emphasises the political relevance of *sentipensamiento* for the Indigenous community’s cosmovision and cosmo-existence in their resistance and resilience against the decades of oppression, violence, and hardships that have been imposed on



The Vibratile Body, curated by Berit Fischer for the *Decompression Gathering Summer Camp* by *Radical Intention* in 2016, Tuscany, Italy. Engaging in local plant healing knowledges with botanist Morena Selva. Photograph by Maria Pecchioli. Courtesy of Maria Pecchioli.

them.¹³ As *sentipensamiento* implies a conscious awareness of being interconnected with all entities (human and more-than-human) at all times, it is an ontology that is not only rooted in a sound environmental awareness, but that also encourages and strengthens life, being, and vitality. It is implemented through “*corazonar*” (Spanish: *corazon*: heart), the “co-reasoning” with the heart, understanding by feeling through the heart.

Philosophically, both notions suggest a shift away from the busy and loud exteriority like that of (self-)representation, towards a reposeful interiority, a sensual microcosmic contemplation and awareness; a micropolitical becoming and activation for engaging in the macropolitical larger scheme of things.¹⁴



Collective Earth Meditation during the two-day encounter *Affective Listening*, at *Errant Sound Art Project Space*, Berlin, Germany. Curated by Berit Fischer in 2017. Photograph by Berit Fischer. Courtesy of Berit Fischer.



Enacting a sonic meditation by experimental composer, performer, and humanitarian Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) as part of *Radical Empathy Lab* by Berit Fischer at *alpha nova & galerie futura*, Berlin, Germany, 2020. Photograph by *alpha nova & galerie futura*. Courtesy of *alpha nova & galerie futura*.

In the context of envisioning feminist instituting, the notions of *sentipensar* and *corazonar* along with the aforementioned idea of a *mestizaje* (de Sousa Santos) offer philosophical frameworks for a practice that seeks to create the conditions in which a sensual, aesthetic (Greek: *aesthēsis*: with sensation) criticality and an overcoming of binarism and polarisation is encouraged.

In her work on decolonisation from dominant Anglo-American philosophy and patriarchal hegemonic power structures, the queer Chicana scholar, poet, writer, and postcolonial feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004) proposes a “mestiza consciousness”: a tapping into the feminine spirit for dissolving established binary and divergent patterns in ways of thinking, for a non-separationist and inclusive perspective.¹⁵ Her perspective expands beyond her particular focus on gender and racial binary norms, as a philosophical approach that invites tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction, and an openness to the deconstruction of rationality, for silencing the analytical and opening up more ambiguous ways of reasoning. “An openness to openness, an openness that does not move towards a conclusion or a resolution.”¹⁶



Deep Listening exercise with Ximena Alarcón during the two-day encounter *Affective Listening*, at Errant Sound Art Project Space, Berlin, Germany. Curated by Berit Fischer in 2017. Photograph by Berit Fischer. Courtesy of Berit Fischer.

Deep Listening was developed by experimental composer, performer, and humanitarian Pauline Oliveros (1932–2016) as an inclusive and embodied practice that amplifies the sense of place and presence through listening. Deep Listening stimulates sonic consciousness, both externally and internally, and encourages experimentation, improvisation, collaboration, joyfulness, and personal and community growth. See, for example, <https://www.deeplisting.rpi.edu>.

Sentipensamiento, *corazonar*, and *mestiza consciousness* describe holistic approaches for ways of knowing and being *with* the world, philosophical and ontological bridges that might help to overcome late capitalism's imposed binary models of generalised singularity, separation, identity, and selfhood. Integrated into philosophical and practical methodologies in feminist instituting and cultural knowledge production, these concepts can build bridges to abandoned and marginalised forms and trans-disciplinary practices of embodied knowing and being.

These practices embrace the body as a rightful ally in the production of knowledge. The body is here acknowledged as an event, “moved and modulated by the polarity between earth and sky,”¹⁷ an open entity, involving a constant process of becoming that is composed by relation, and in an affective encounter with the Other.

The body as relation plays a vital role within the incomplete and continuous process of becoming and ever-changing social interactions and improvisations in the ways of instituting. Political philosopher and literary theorist Michael Hardt elaborates on the notion of body as relation:

[T]he body lives as long as that relation is maintained. Instead of thinking in terms of unities, then, we need to think the relation among multiplicities and recognize the consistency of dispersed landscapes. To identify the locus of decision or acting or being acted upon, we need to look to not the *one* but the consistent relation among the *many*.¹⁸



Social Presencing Theatre with Manuela Bosch during *The Articulating Body Experiments on De-configuring Reactionary Anaesthesia*, 2019 curated by Berit Fischer at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design University of Bergen, Norway. Photograph by Jane Sverdrupsen. Courtesy of Jane Sverdrupsen.

Social Presencing Theatre (SPT) is an art form and social method that sharpens self-inquiry and systemic views on social change. It was developed by choreographer, performer, and educator Arawana Hayashi and scholar Otto Scharmer. It is not theatre in the conventional sense. Instead, it offers a blank stage for simple body postures and movements in order to dissolve limiting concepts, to access intuition, and to make visible both current reality, and the deeper—often invisible—points for creating profound change and future possibilities. SPT evokes the unspoken. It activates and brings together the knowing-body, the use of unconscious embodied knowledge with group intelligence and creative expression. See, for example, <https://arawanahayashi.com>.

Similar to the Indigenous ontological *sentipensar*, it is relationality and affectivity which support and strengthen being, life, and vitality:

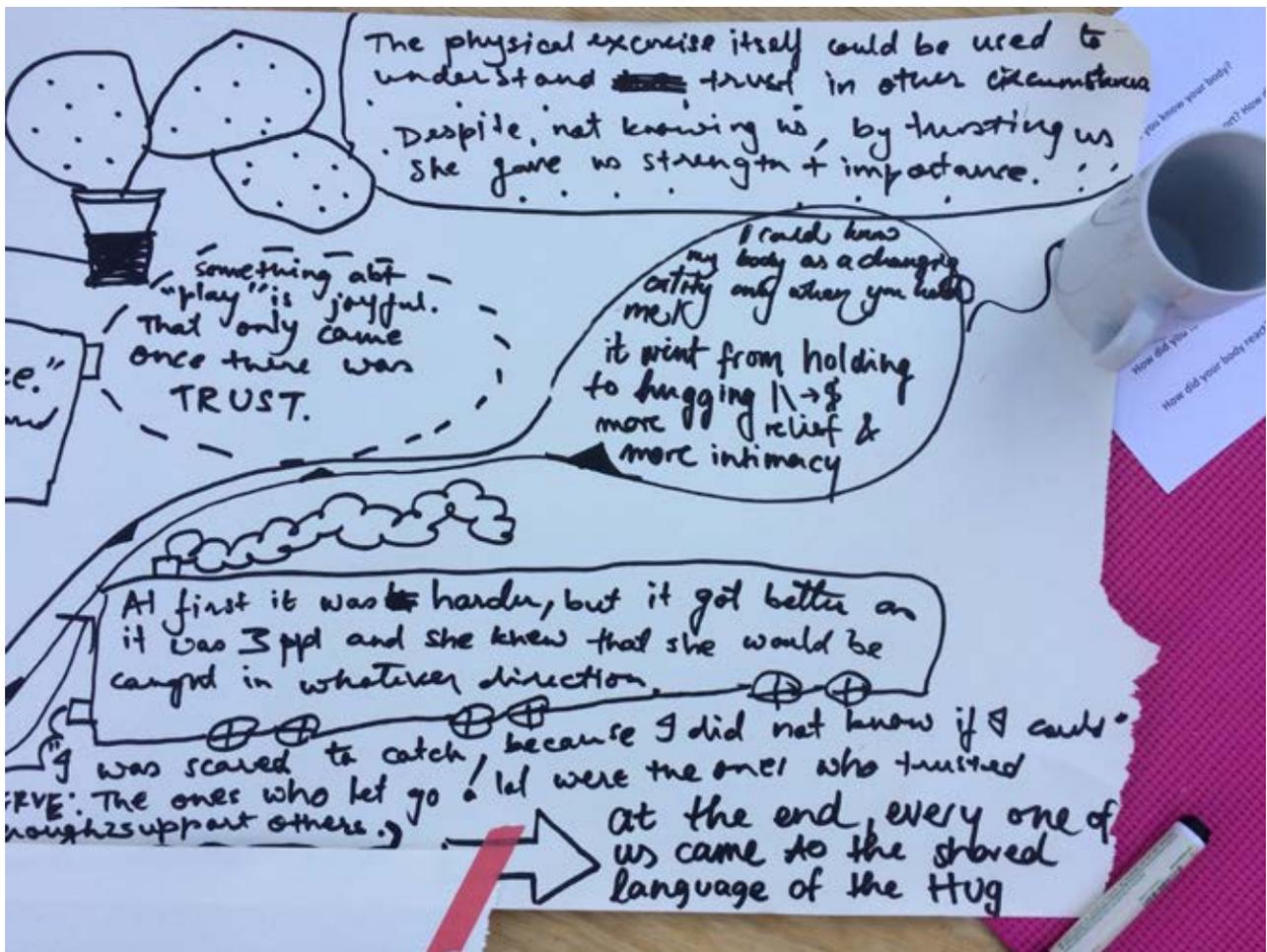
The more you are affected in many ways, the more alive you are, and to the extent you cease to be affected, to the extent you close off from the world, that much you die.¹⁹

The physical, relational, and expressing body plays a significant role in making sense of the material conditions and social relations of the powers that shape our lives. It is the central metaphor of political and social order²⁰ and therefore is central to the contemplation of instituting and instituting critique.



A Biodanza experience with Susu Grunenberg during *The Articulating Body Experiments on De-configuring Reactionary Anaesthesia*, 2019 curated by Berit Fischer at the Faculty of Fine Art, Music and Design University of Bergen, Norway. Photograph by Berit Fischer. Courtesy of Berit Fischer.

Biodanza, the “dance of life”—*bios* (Greek: life) and *danza* (Spanish: dance)—is an integrative and holistic dancing process and system that works as a practice for poetic human encounter and communication, for self-empowerment and self-transformation, to develop one’s vitality, affectivity, creativity, and courage to express oneself. It was developed by Chilean psychologist and artist Rolando Toro in the 1970s as an affective re-education and re-learning of life’s original functions. It influences our mind, consciousness, intuition, and organic neuro-vegetative and affective functions.



Radical Empathy Lab at Making Futures School, Berlin, Germany, 2019. Body Locomotion Exercise. Photograph by Berit Fischer. Courtesy of Berit Fischer



Radical Empathy Lab at Floating University, satellite site of the Making Futures School, Berlin Germany, 2019. Deep Listening Exercise inspired by Pauline Oliveros. Photograph by Berit Fischer. Courtesy of Berit Fischer.

Garcés elaborates:

[T]he problem of critique is no longer a problem of conscience but of embodiment: it does not concern a conscience facing the world but rather a body that is in and with the world. This not only terminates the role of intellectuals and their balconies, [...], but also disposes of the mechanisms of legitimation of the intellectuals' word and their mode of expression.²¹

Embodying critique, to holistically feel-think, and micropolitically being *with* the world, are ontological and philosophical livelihoods to dispose of mechanisms of legitimation and institutionalisation of static, hegemonial, and binary thought, to dispose of “impotence” (Garcés) and reactionary an-aesthesia (Rolnik), of mere representations and reproductions of existing relations. This practice allows for a shift in relations, away from a passive on-looking towards an activated and self-empowered protagonist. A holistic and relational—versus informational and representational—curation, for an empowering activation not only of the curatorial public but the relations within instituting itself, instigates processes of collective agreement and collective becoming. Such a feminist instituting cultivates a *mestiza consciousness* and experiments with *sentipensamiento*, with embodied critical feel-thinking, engendering an alternative ethical-aesthetic-political-cultural practice that is post-representational, affective, experiential, and transdisciplinary.

Notes

1 Juan Cepeda H., “The Problem of Being in Latin America: Approaching the Latin American Ontological *sentipensar*,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 2 (Summer 2017): 24.

2 See: Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism* (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, Verksted #1, 2003).

3 Natalie Loveless, “On Situatedness and Ecological Form” (paper presented at *New Alphabet School #2 Situating*, Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 7 November 2019).

4 Suely Rolnik, “Thinking from the Knowing-Body. A Micropolitics to Resist the Colonial-Capitalist Unconscious” (paper presented at conference: *Turning (to) Archive. Institutional Histories, Educational Regimes, Artistic Practices and Politics of Remembrance*, Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Austria, April 2015).

5 Marina Garcés, “To Embody Critique: Some Theses, Some Examples,” in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFly Books, 2009), 203.

6 *Ibid.*, 204.

7 Introducing the “Other” written in upper case offers additional subtext and a layer of reflection that embraces the notion of Otherness and Othering. The intellectual history and concept of Otherness is a massive field of enquiry which cannot be elaborated further in the scope of this article.

8 See also: Loveless, “On Situatedness and Ecological Form.”

9 For more information, please visit www.beritfischer.org.

I am aware of the dilemma that experiences cannot be made tangible through linguistic description nor through illustrative images. Acknowledging that images merely reiterate re-presentations that this article strives to challenge, the images offered here—all stemming from various iterations of the *Radical Empathy Lab*—are an invitation to be read sort of as an evocative parallel visual text that weaves itself into the theoretical one. A reading that might open a hybrid space of ambiguity.

10 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *The End of the Cognitive Empire, The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 109.

11 *Ibid.*, 107.

12 Cepeda H., “The Problem of Being in Latin America,” 24.

Cepeda’s writing is inspired by the thinking of Argentinian philosopher Rodolfo Kusch (1922-79). In his book *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América* (originally published 1970), Kusch seeks to identify and recover the Indigenous and popular way of thinking and draws attention to the binary in technologies and rationalities based on European modernity in América. Kusch differentiates between the academic abstract notion of philosophy taught in traditional Western thinking from a personal one that is based within subjective everyday life, which he refers to as “*pensar*” (thinking), which traditionally does not find recognition in science.

13 de Sousa Santos, “*The End of the Cognitive Empire*,” 316.

14 See also: Eduardo Duarte, “The Dawn of Latin American Philosophy,” as part of *LACS Synthesis Lecture 2: Cepeda’s Latin American Ontological Sentipensar*, recorded spring 2018 at Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, sound file, 48:58, accessed January 12, 2021, <https://soundcloud.com/user2603690/duarte-lacs-synthesis-2>.

15 Anzaldúa’s most prominent book is *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

16 Duarte, “The Dawn of Latin American Philosophy.”

17 Carla Bottiglieri, “Bodily Semblances, Temporary Dwellings: Somatic Moulding of Spaces and Subjectivities,” trans. Manuela Zechner, Carla Bottiglieri, Brent Waterhouse, in *The Nanopolitics Handbook*, eds. Nanopolitics Group (Paolo Plotegher, Manuela Zechner and Bue Rübner Hansen) (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2014), 122.

18 Michael Hardt, “The Power to Be Affected,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 3 (September 2015): 216.

19 *Ibid.*, 217.

20 Lisa Blackman, *The Body: The Key Concepts* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2008), 17.

21 Garcés, “To Embody Critique,” 204.

Berit Fischer is a curator, researcher, and writer who has worked internationally since 1999. She holds a PhD from the Winchester School of Art/Southampton University, UK.

Her curatorial research interests lie in critical spatial practices, socially and holistically produced spaces, the specification of art as a producer of new knowledge, as a means to permeate the status quo, the creation of fields of action, and the development of spaces for critical engagement, affective encounter, and relational learning. Her practice-based doctoral research asked how the curatorial can activate spaces and conditions for a micropolitical and holistic making of social empathy, as an approach to post-representational curation. In 2016, she founded the *Radical Empathy Lab*, an ongoing nomadic and artistic social and research laboratory for alternative and holistic knowledge production.

She has published articles internationally, e.g., with *Afterall* and *Onomatopée*, both contributed and edited or co-edited books like *New Spaces for Negotiating Art (and) Histories in Africa*, *Hlysnan: The Notion and Politics of Listening*, and *Other Possible Worlds – Proposals on this Side of Utopia*.

She has presented tutorials, lectures, and workshops around the world, e.g., at *Making Futures School* (raumlabor, UdK Berlin), Bergen University, ZhdK, Freie Universität Berlin, Nottingham Trent University, and at Soma in Mexico City. Some of her notable curatorial projects have taken place at Floating University, Berlin; Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart; nGbK, Berlin; Radical Intention, Italy; tranzit.sk, Bratislava; Casino Luxembourg Forum d'Art Contemporain; *Brooklyn Waterfront Outdoor Sculpture Exhibition* and *Dumbo Arts Festival*, New York; Zendai Museum of Modern Art, Shanghai; and BankART, Yokohama.

www.beritfischer.org

Section 3: Curatorial Herstories

Now Imagine That We Are a Village

Romane Bernard, Sofia Cecere, Thelma Gaster, Jeanne Guillou, Barbara Lefebvre, Séraphine Le Maire, Oksana Luysen, Rose Moreau, Jeanne Porte, Laurence Rassel, and Miska Tokarek

Call drawing by Marie Béney
Drawings by Rose Moreau

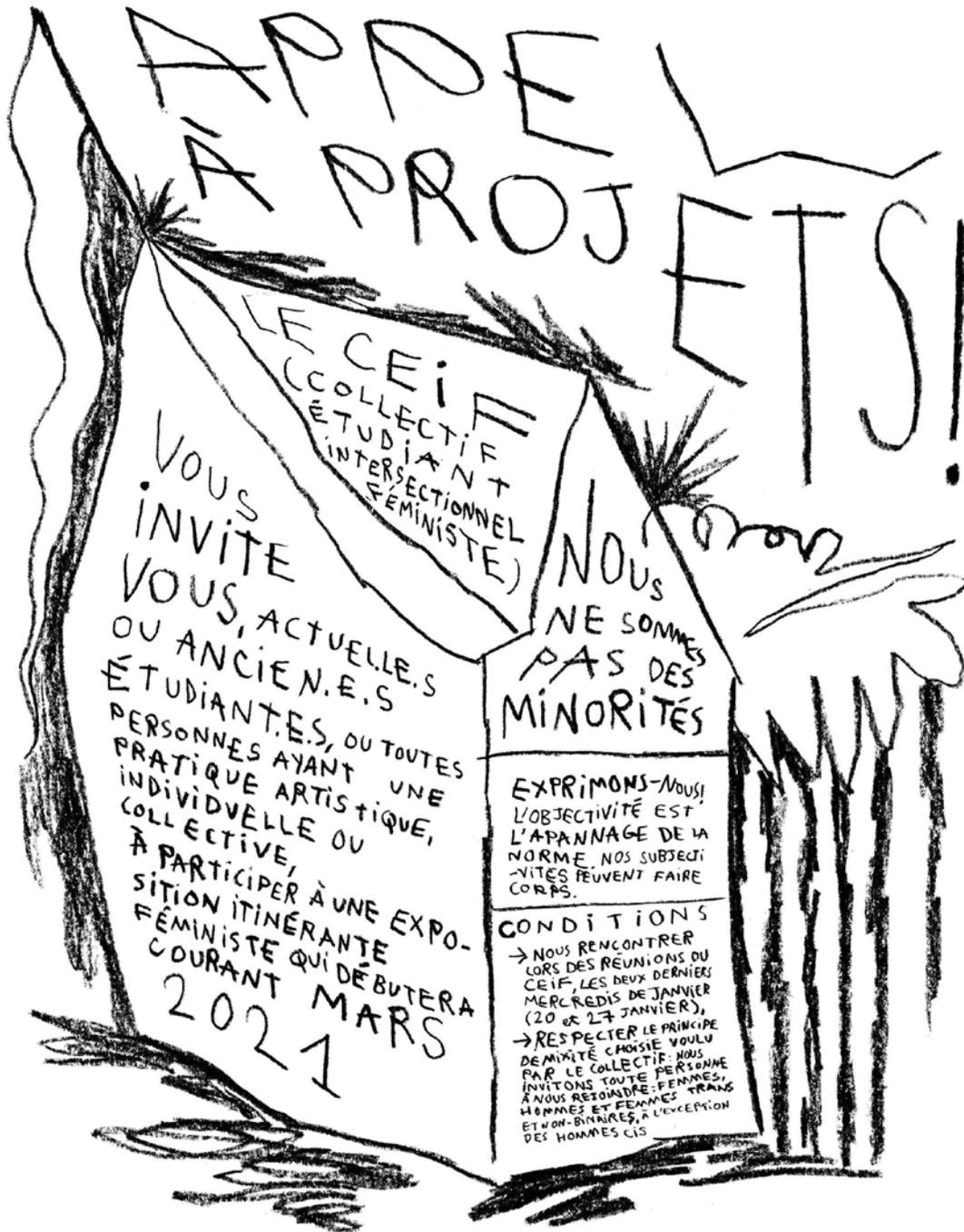
At the end of 2020, Helena Reckitt emailed to invite me to contribute to the issue of *OnCurating on Instituting Feminism* that she is co-editing with Dorothee Richter. Since 2016, I have been acting as director of an art school in Brussels, *erg* (école de recherche graphique, école supérieure des arts).¹ In this role, I have publicly claimed and attempted to act as a feminist. Feminism, from my position, is fundamentally about asking “who, what, for, and in which conditions, and how?” never taking anything for granted, or as natural, above all within cultural and educational institutions.

When invited by Helena, my first reaction was to write this article with, and give the floor to, a collective of artists who are dealing with, challenging, imagining, and enacting an intersectional and feminist exhibition, in tandem with thinking and doing a contemporary feminist practice.

Comprising current or former students from various Brussels art schools, the “collectif étudiant intersectionnel féministe” (CEIF²) was created in 2020, just before, as we now call it, “the second lockdown.” Their “approach is to bring together a diversity of feminisms and gender experiences in a single struggle, united against patriarchy. The artistic forms and expressions that the collective represents and supports are equally diverse.”³ Invited by the réseau genre ESNU⁴ (higher education non-university gender network) to conceive a travelling exhibition, they took time and care to define the protocols of a call to fellow artists and students, the decision-making structures, the curation, and the installation of a feminist intersectional exhibition.

The following, in the words of the CEIF, is the call for projects,⁵ as well as their thinking process about the exhibition, preparatory drawings, and references that outline the inspirations and paths for a feminist exhibition.

– Laurence Rassel



ENVOIES UN MAIL À : CEIF-EXPO@PROTONMAIL.COM



“Moving bodies embody a resistance to the immobile and reactionary state.”
 – Iris Brey, 2020⁶

“The oppression of bodies by patriarchy—of people who are called ‘minorities’—
 is a reality, justified by their presumed or real inadaptability to the world.”
 – Thelma Gaster, 2021

“The ‘resurgences’: reappearance in the open air, in the form of a large spring, of
 water absorbed by underground cavities.”
 – Miska Tokarek, 2021

In order to reach as many people as possible, we felt it was necessary to launch a call for projects, via a poster campaign in various art schools and streets, to announce the exhibition. The responses were overwhelming.

We felt it was necessary to take care of the welcoming of these people. Presentation times are planned for each person, speech is encouraged, visualisation sessions (see below) or exercises to allow the body to take the space play an important role in enabling people to feel accompanied, respected, and in cohesion with the group.

Building common ground is the source of emancipation of the group. We have materialised this common ground in the form of a group of huts in the exhibition’s scenography.





Our constant desire for openness is what allows us to understand, to prevent, to heal, to undertake in empathy with everything that constitutes us and everything that constitutes others.

We were obsessed by the desire to heal the individual while building something common, but how? The image of the village, which today has become much more than an image for us, appeared to us as a metaphor for what we wanted the participants to project themselves towards. A whole made up of individuality, relationships, and intersubjectivity. It allowed us to think about the idea of “system,” which is difficult to grasp in normal times.

VISUALISATION SESSION 1: “Now imagine that we are a village: how is the village organised? the dwellings? [...] what are the circuits of sharing and knowledge? How do we learn yours? How do we transmit? Are there schools? Philosophers, wise men, madmen/women? What are our relationships with madmen and wise men? [...] Is there a leader? Imagine a feminist village.”

After imagining this, the shape of the exhibition begins to emerge. Then we had to think about travel and itinerancy of the exhibition: where is the urgency? At school, in the street, in the museum? Everything seems to be on fire to us, and we envisage the exhibition moving from one place to another, crossing spaces and the borders that are sometimes set up between them.

VISUALISATION SESSION 2 “How do we move together in space? Where do we go? Do we meet in the street? In a museum? In a squat? In an abandoned place? Does the night belong to us? Are we safe or are we putting ourselves in some danger? [...] How are we going to fortify ourselves? To be connected and face this sometimes dangerous, sometimes welcoming world?”

“What if the revolution was not a product, nor a vague and distant promised land, but the relations we have around us, there, now?”

The text was written in March 2021 by current members of the collective.

Notes

1 www.erg.be.

2 An informal group of people from the non-university higher education sectors (ESNU), which was created under the impetus of the non-profit organization Sophia (Sophia’s primary aim is to foster research and teaching in the field of gender studies in Belgium. See: www.sophia.be). This group brings together actors concerned with gender and diversity issues. Non-university higher education includes art schools in the French-speaking community in Belgium.

3 CEIF.

4 <https://ceif.collectifs.net/>.

5 Translation of call (originally in French):

The [CEIF] (feminist intersectional student collective), invites you, current or former students or any person with an individual or collective artistic practice to participate in a travelling feminist exhibition that will begin in March 2021. Objectivity is the prerogative of the norm. We are not minorities who express our views. Our subjectivities can become one.

Conditions:

– to meet us during the meetings of the [CEIF], the last two Wednesdays of January (20 and 27 January 2021)

and

– to respect the principle of gender balance desired by the collective: we invite everyone to join us, women, trans and non-binary men/women, with the exception of cis men, who are not invited.

For more information and to get in touch with us: ceif-expo@protonmail.com.

6 Iris Brey, *Le regard féminin* (Paris: éd. De l’Olivier, 2020).

7 Kai Cheng Thom, “8 pas vers une culture de l’indispensable,” in “Si vous pensez qu’ils doivent mourir...,” *Fanzine Le Village* 1 (October 2020): 20.

Feminist Curating as Curatorial Activism: A Roundtable

Ann Sutherland Harris, Daria Khan,
Rosa Martínez, Camille Morineau,
Maura Reilly, and Catherine de Zegher

“Curatorial Activism” is a term Maura Reilly coined over a decade ago and extrapolated upon in great detail in her 2018 book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*. The book celebrates contemporary curatorial strategies that provide productive and, at times, transformative alternatives to exclusionary, mainstream curatorial strategies that continue to reproduce inequality in their almost-exclusive focus of white, western cis-male artists. Curatorial activists, then, are curators who organize art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that large constituencies of artists, who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether, are no longer excluded from the master narratives of art—as such, they focus almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists. What follows is a conversation with six curatorial activists—most of whom have dedicated themselves almost entirely to the feminist cause—and all of whom have organized groundbreaking feminist art exhibitions. We explore the dual projects of feminist curating—either curating works of feminist or women’s art or curating from a feminist perspective (or both). Both of these projects are extremely necessary. We discuss the many obstacles and challenges we have faced as feminist curators; we contemplate the impact we may have had on the field of art, the recurring backlashes related to the feminist cause, our relationships to the issue of race, the need for continued feminist solidarity characterized by generosity not backstabbing, the past and future of feminist curating, strategic essentialism, and the structural changes needed at an institutional level before progress can truly be made.

This roundtable discussion took place on January 7, 2021 following a panel organized by Maura Reilly and sponsored by *The Brooklyn Rail* as part of their “Common Ground” series.

The link to the panel and discussion can be found here: <https://brooklynrail.org/events/2021/01/07/curatorial-activism-part-2/>

Rosa Martínez (RM): I wanted to ask to each of you if you’ve faced any major difficulties in organizing feminist art exhibitions?

Maura Reilly (MR): I would imagine a common link for all of us is the patriarchal resistance to feminism, in general.

Camille Morineau (CM): For me, organizing feminist art exhibitions has taken more time, more money, and more effort in order to properly show the works of women artists, simply because there’s not enough information, especially prior to contemporary art. This is precisely why I co-founded AWARE (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions), which is a non-profit organization dedicated to the history of women artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, from all over the world. We have more than 700 biographies, researched and illustrated, available in French and English on our website. There is also a lot of “non-academic” content designed to enable us to reach out to children, teachers, or anyone interested in writing an alternate history; 45,000 visitors per month explore the content on AWARE, from across the globe. We have recently expanded our research to women artists from Africa and the Asia Pacific and have been publishing that content as well.

MR: Ann, you and I had conversations about the difficulty of and challenges with mounting *Women Artists*¹—how you had to locate long-forgotten paintings in the storage units of museums. Some of these women artists had been entirely overlooked by curators at these museums. What was the main obstacle for you?

Ann Sutherland Harris (ASH): It was difficult. Collecting the basic information took a year. My teaching assistant Stephanie Barron went through Thieme-Becker—these two German scholars, Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, were the first to make a complete dictionary of all the artists then known; they included a few women. That was a start. Giorgio Vasari's biographies mention Sofonisba Anguissola, and Carlo Malvasia had crucial information about Elisabetta Sirani. As Linda Nochlin described it, we were “starting from scratch.” As for the tour, I think it was significant that we couldn't get the Art Institute of Chicago or the Cleveland Art Museum to take it, and the Metropolitan Museum turned it down, too, but the Brooklyn Museum was delighted to host it.

Catherine de Zegher (CdZ): Most of the work by women artists is in museum storage. When I became the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, I could hardly find a work by a woman artist on the wall. I tried to take out as many artworks as possible from storage. When I initiated an exhibition in 2018 of women artists from the Baroque, with Artemisia Gentileschi amongst them, I remember vividly how, when I left the museum and retired, one of the curators said behind my back: “Now we are finished with feminist readings of artworks and exhibitions.”² It was very disappointing. Although I suppose it makes sense, since I was the first woman director of that museum in 200 years. In this context, I wonder if you still all feel that your feminist activist curating has made an impact in the field or even in society at large?

MR: I hope that my curatorial practice has made an impact. While my 2007 exhibition *Global Feminisms*³ received mixed reviews at the time, I've had countless younger feminist curators express to me how important that exhibition is to their practice. The exhibition was the first truly intersectional and transnational feminist art exhibition at a major museum. *WACK!*,⁴ which opened in the same year, had a handful of international artists, but was primarily an exhibition of white feminist artists. *Global Feminisms* was the reverse: there were many more non-Western women artists than there were those from the Global North. The younger generation

seems to have appreciated this more than the critics of the exhibition at the time, some of whom complained about a lack of male artists (hello?) and the in-your-face feminist content (again, hello?). The younger generation has been far more generous and compassionate in contemplating the exhibition's inadequacies, along with its strengths, preferring to focus on its historical import and its emphasis on BIPOC feminist artists. I think, above all, my role as Founding Curator at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum has been the most impactful on this generation, and generations to come. The Center is an unprecedented museum space, and I hope that the many ways in which I shaped its founding—from its overarching conceptual framework, the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, and the many exhibitions I curated therein—will be influential well into the future. I'd like to think that my other curatorial projects have been influential as well. I'm particularly proud of an exhibition I organized in 2009 of Carolee Schneemann's paintings—the first time they'd been exhibited in almost forty years. I even reconstructed her *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963), the huge sculpture in front of which she photographed *Eye Body*, which had been languishing in her storage for decades. Before her death, Carolee told me that that exhibition and my re-discovery of her paintings was a game-changer for her career, and the sale of those works transformed her market value at a time when she was struggling financially. Before that time, no one had bothered to look at her paintings, including her dealers, as important components of her decades-long practice. She had become somewhat pigeonholed as a performance artist, while other dimensions of her complex oeuvre were overshadowed by certain canonical works. Her next retrospective at PS1, curated by Sabine Breitwieser, included a large sampling of the exact same paintings that I'd chosen for my exhibition (including the *Four Fur Cutting Boards* that I'd reconstructed). Shockingly, Sabine did not acknowledge my exhibition, nor did she even include me in a footnote in the catalogue, much to my and Carolee's surprise. A prime example of women not supporting or recognizing other women. Nevertheless, it was incredibly heartening to me that my exhibition had had such a financial and conceptual impact on Carolee's practice. I also think the queer art and Indigenous Australian art exhibitions that I've organized have pushed the conversation about contemporary art in provocative, and I hope impactful, ways.



Exhibition's view *elles@centrepompidou* at the Centre Pompidou. 27 May, 2009 – 21 February 2011. Photo: Adam Rzepka.



Exhibition's view *elles@centrepompidou* at the Centre Pompidou. 27 May, 2009 – 21 February 2011. Photo: Adam Rzepka.

CM: I feel that my exhibitions have had impact, each of them differently according to their opening date. *elles@centrepompidou* was presented in 2009 when the word “feminist” was still taboo in France, although many feminist exhibitions had taken place. So, my fight was mostly to explain why showing 300 female artists from the permanent collection, instead of mostly male (90% until then) artists, was in itself an activist demonstration. I wanted to demonstrate that women could write the history of 20th century art as strongly as men. But I was often attacked for “ghettoizing” women artists. A

few years later, the Niki de Saint Phalle retrospective (2014) at the Pompidou Centre was already easier to explain: she was a famous artist, but her feminism had simply been forgotten. By this point the word “feminist” was easier to use, and Saint Phalle made it so easy for me: she was just so clear and strong about it! Then in 2016, the exhibition *Women House*⁵ that I organized opened at Monnaie in Paris, a collective thematic show exploring how women artists had been representing domesticity, and architecture, for a century, a few months after *L'autre continent*, a group show about



Exhibition's view *elles@centrepompidou* at the Centre Pompidou. 27 May, 2009 – 21 February 2011. Photo: Adam Rzepka.

destiny that took shape, first in the Barcelona Biennial (1988-1991) and then in the series of exhibitions I curated for the experimental space Sala Montcada of La Caixa Foundation in 1992, where I included artists like Nan Goldin and Jana Sterbak. And this was something relevant in Spain at that moment. I then continued with collective curated projects like the first Manifesta, or the 5th International Istanbul Biennial in 1997 that I curated alone and that was a landmark in the history of this event, and also in my personal and professional life. I enjoyed having so much freedom to select the artists and to give them the chance of working in historical and public spaces of the incredible city of Istanbul. Apart from the exhibit I created in the Arsenale for the Venice Biennale of 2005, if I had to point out an exhibition that really changed the vision and the understanding of curating in the third millennium, it is the one I organized for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Teresa of Avila in 2015. To update the spiritual and existential legacy of that astounding woman in connection with the Baroque sculptures of the National Museum of Sculpture in Valladolid—and with the carefully selected works of contemporary artists like Cristina Lucas, Pilar Albarracín, Marina Abramovic and Louise Bourgeois—gave me the chance to create unique connections and echoes between past, present, and future.

CdZ: Twenty-five years ago, I curated the exhibition *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. The word “elliptical” in the title means oval, egg-shaped, looped, serpentine, eccentric, or off-center. Maybe the almost-immediate recognition of the exhibition came because it happened at a tipping point, or maybe in some ways the exhibition itself precipitated what was to follow by attracting to it, and around it, ideas and arguments that were bubbling just under the surface. It was an opening onto a present only just being acknowledged, it was in a beautiful sense pregnant with an irresistible becoming: a feminine principle. Sometimes, not often but sometimes, it is like this, when currents of thought in the world connect far beyond what you are aware of as you work and prepare. This was its immanence and its difference. This winter, in the anniversary edition of the Dutch art magazine *See All This*, I was asked to revisit the exhibition and its impact. I pointed out that, indeed, again and again, in times of upheaval like today, the work of women artists can be seen to lead the way in their apparent attempts to formulate more inclusive and empathic models of coexistence in a 21st century society—a society that is



Rosa Martinez, first woman director of the Venice Biennale (2005), with her Italian predecessors (from left to right): Francesco Bonami, Germano Celant, Achille Bonito Oliva and Giovanni Carandente, Photo copyright: Giorgio Zuchiatti. Courtesy: Archivio Storico della Biennale di Venezia ASAC.

tending to be increasingly manipulative, deceptive, intolerant, and violent. In women’s precarious art, however, we often discover a sense of consciousness, collaboration, and constructive criticism informed by a desire for beauty, fragility, compassion, and hope. Rather than on negativity and separation, women’s day-to-day work is predicated on sharing and love— notions from which these artists don’t shy away. Many promote a kind of humanism and anti-fascism to counteract the worst irrational sentiments of humankind: resentment, arrogance, xenophobia, greed, lust for power, and fear itself. Daring and caring, these women artists are for me amazons battling the sham-culture of our age and calling for resistance, for the capacity to transcend ourselves, and, I so strongly believe, to rewild our planet. Whenever similar crises occurred in the 20th century, with every new generation, women artists stood up and worked at the forefront, while different times demanded different resolutions. It is the work, thoughtfulness, and brilliance of individual women in shared purpose that has made an impact. It is the consequence of a lifetime’s struggle of extraordinary people, not only artists and curators, but also, and I want to say this from a lifetime’s experience of working to make things happen, because it is often overlooked and misunderstood, funders and patrons, like Barbara Lee, who, inspired by *Inside the Visible*, started to collect women artists and to support women politicians in the US to remarkable effect.

Daria Khan (DK): I definitely feel the impact of working in London versus working somewhere else. For instance, when I organized an exhibition which included Tejal Shah’s overtly queer feminist work in Russia in 2013—where we showed *Between the Waves* as



Guerrilla Girls, *Benvenuti alla Biennale Femminista*, 2005
Copyright 2005: Guerrilla Girls

part of the exhibition dedicated to Sergei Paradjanov’s legacy—the hosting institution actually wanted to remove the work just before the opening because they didn’t watch the videos until the very last minute and eventually found them too disturbing for the public. The work remained on view and became a very powerful statement in the context of the newly adopted gay propaganda law. In London, however, I haven’t experienced any difficulties and I’ve felt that my work at the non-profit art institution Mimosa House, which I founded in 2018, has been really appreciated overall. I acknowledge that that’s thanks to all the work that has been done before me by you all, and others. I’m quite aware, though, that what we do is experienced by a very small percentage of the public. I think it’s a very gradual and persistent process of establishing our relationships with communities and reaching out to people and asking what people want to see and experience, involving them in the process of artistic programming. That’s how we can be truly impactful.

MR: You raise an interesting point, Daria. I worry our work is simply preaching to the converted, that those who attend our shows are already mindful of the feminist cause. Are we managing to get people that are

uninterested in the feminist cause to come to our exhibitions? That was one of the issues that we discussed when founding the Sackler Center. As we set out to locate a space within the museum for the new Center, we felt it was important to choose a spot where visitors have to transverse the Center in order to get from one wing to another. In other words, we forced those who are uninterested in feminism to walk through the feminist center. Do you all worry about your audiences in this way?

CM: Yes, I think it’s a very important point. I believe if we are to change the public’s perception of feminism, we need a wider audience. We need to engage young people—children, students all ages—and to give teachers the tools to present the materials and develop knowledge. So, I co-founded with Maura, a program called TEAM, which is associated with AWARE, where fifteen academics from all over the world, all specialists in women artists, work with five students each to write either a biography or a research paper on one or more women artists. I believe that the knowledge must flow from one generation to the next, and on, and on. AWARE also conducts special programs for children—short animation films with straightforward texts catered to those who are not specialists of art history.

MR: The importance of educational initiatives in/ around our exhibitions cannot be underestimated. That was definitely a concern vis-à-vis *The Dinner Party* for which we wrote easily digestible—dare I say “non-threatening”—texts to address the gynophobia the work induces in mainstream audiences. Rosa, I’m sure you contemplated this issue of “preaching to the converted” when you organized the 2005 Venice Biennale with María da Corral.

RM: Yes, I did. But I also knew that it was a wonderful chance to convert the incredulous, so I think the opportunity to put feminist art front and center was not missed. Just as you entered the Arsenale, visitors saw the big chandelier work titled *A Noiva (The Bride)* by Joana Vasconcelos, which is an incredible lamp six meters high made out of shiny tampons that in the context of Venice looked like a giant Murano lamp. This sculpture was surrounded by posters specifically created for the occasion by the Guerrilla Girls who gathered shocking statistics about the presence, or lack thereof, of women in the different Venice Biennales. María and I were very conscious that we were the first female curators to organize the Biennale in its 51st edition in 2005 and that this granted us a wonderful

platform to showcase a large sampling of important work by women artists. It has to be taken into account that the percentage of women artists in the first Biennale in 1895 was 2.4 %. The percentage of artists a century later in 1995 was 9%. So, the numbers speak clearly. In our Biennale in 2005, more than 60% were female artists, which I think is a good ratio to compensate for the “much macho biennales” of 1978, 1986, 1988, or 1995, where more than 90% of artists were men, as the Guerrilla Girls pointed out.

ASH: I have an idea. What if one curated an exhibition along a particular theme but did not identify the sex of the artists to see what kind of response you'd get from the audience? It might be interesting to do that.

RM: Well, this was done in the amazing series of exhibitions presented during the Biennales from 2007 to 2017 at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice. Organized by the Axel Vervoordt Foundation, these series were part of a unique interaction between the architecture of the Palazzo, the legacy of Mariano Fortuny, and the desire to dissolve the frontiers that separate aesthetic categories, anthropological cultures, historical chronologies, and also gender. I was lucky to be part of the curatorial team that organized the exhibition *TRA. Edge of Becoming* in 2011. There were no labels; no names were inscribed besides the works. The visitor was invited to do a “parcours” where the formal connections and the beauty of the path were the only meaningful ways of approaching the experience without calling attention to the sex, the age, or the country of the artist. However, I have to say that the majority of the participants were men, as this was a tradition at the Vervoordt Foundation. But amazing women were included for my exhibition, *TRA*. I also have to say that some female artists did not want to participate as they requested to have the same size of space as some of the male artists. So, this was part of the struggle...

MR: I'm curious about the multifarious and individualized definitions of feminism that we witness in feminist curation. Camille, you discuss your curatorial approach to *Elles* in your catalogue essay. You state that your aim is not to define feminism, nor the exhibition's relationship to feminism, nor your own personal relationship to feminism. Was there a reason for not wanting to call the show a “feminist” project—I suppose I'm thinking here of the public-facing interpretative materials, wall text, and so on?

CM: Until recently (I would say, roughly ten years), very few French women granted themselves the right to use the word “feminist,” and lashed out at anyone using it without their permission. That's one of the reasons I didn't use it to promote *Elles*, and even then, I was harshly criticized by some feminists for “ghettoizing women.” There is a second reason: at the time the word frightened men and non-feminist women, too, so I just had to move swiftly and stealthily, to organize what was indeed a feminist gesture, by promoting it as an art historian researching an under-recognized subject. It was really both, but better to use a neutral approach, and let the public reach their own opinion. Over 2.5 million people visited the exhibition—men, women, children, many of whom came back repeatedly. The exhibition showed them that women had played a huge part in the avant-garde. It was very simple and straightforward, in the end.

MR: I believe *Elles* embodied a feminist methodological approach to curating without question. I'm a firm believer in the concept of feminisms in the plural, hence my exhibition curated with Linda Nochlin, *Global Feminisms*. I think it's really fascinating how people have these very specific definitions of feminism and if the curated shows that we organize do not match *their* definition, they question whether our shows are “feminist” enough. This has happened I think to all of us, and sadly that criticism, more often than not, comes from other women. If we use the term feminisms, always in the plural, it allows for our subjective, personalized definitions. We should be supportive and generous about that. Most of us have dealt with this, as Camille discussed—as, for instance, Germaine Greer's scathing criticism of *Elles*. I'm thinking also about Catherine's *Inside the Visible*, which received mixed critical reception. While many critics raved about the show, others were highly critical of the use of “feminine” in the exhibition's title and insisted the show wasn't “feminist.” Some criticized its women-only focus itself as essentialist, asking “what brings together such disparate artists across time and space other than an assumption that they are joined by their ‘women's experience?’”⁶ Some complained that the show and catalogue were problematic in their failure to clarify the project's oblique relationship to a more explicitly stated or activist feminism, and to specific histories of feminist art. Some were upset, Catherine, that you'd avoided the term feminism by substituting it for the “feminine.” I disagree. To me, the women artists in the show were demonstrated to have developed positions of general resistance in relationship to other dominant themes in

the 20th century: dictatorship in Latin America, fascism in Europe, racism in America. And, so you posited the word “feminine” in the exhibition’s full title as a force of resistance, not as an essence. How have you responded to those critics who claim the exhibition is not feminist?

CdZ: When I speak to a feminine principle, I do not apologize for it. From the experience of my lifetime, how can I not speak for inclusion, tolerance, and respect? I do not speak against women who have taken other paths, or who hold to other beliefs drawn from their experience, or other notions of feminism. I know how overwhelming it can feel just to speak out and to give place to the voices of others who were silenced. As you say, feminism is not, and never has been, a monolithic movement: alongside the feminisms of the Anglo-Saxon world, there was, for example, the French feminist movement of the 1970s by which I was very inspired. Hélène Cixous first coined the term *écriture féminine* (‘feminine writing’) in her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975)—and this seems to me to address what we are coming to here—she asserts that, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies,” because their sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression. Some women philosophers, psychoanalysts, and art historians—such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, Geeta Kapur, Jean Fisher—and artists like Lygia Clark, Nancy Spero, Anna Maria Maiolino, Bracha Ettinger, Everlyn Nicodemus, Cecilia Vicuña, and Erin Manning have tried to formulate a new textual and visual language to convey how humans come to understand their social roles. More recently, Judith Butler characterized feminism as a vision of solidarity, as a universal emancipatory movement. In this context, we can acknowledge (eco) feminism as a coalitional practice, as a movement that enables to see what was (or is) eclipsed: that which is unaligned with the conventions of the moment, or which needs different conditions of perceptibility... We see ourselves, I believe, as both speaking for feminism—and remember that, for artists with complex histories, who may have been marginalized at many different levels, feminism is just one part of their concerns—and as sharing in senses and meanings that could be described as having a feminine principle in terms of politics and world view. I don’t say this in an essentialist way, and I don’t try to determine whether it is shaped by culture, biology, or nature—in our lifetime, when we are still dealing with the effects, the immediate, pressing effects and the real jeopardy we face, the origin hardly



Everlyn Nicodemus, *Bystander (Spaces IX)*, 1997, Silkscreen on canvas, with ink, thread and paint additions, 0.5 x 36.5 cm. Copyright the Artist, Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery.



Anna Maria Maiolino, *Entrevidas / Between Lives*, 1981. Copyright the Artist



Nancy Spero, *Picasso and Frederick's of Hollywood*, 1990; diptych, handprinted collage on paper; two parts, each 43.5 x 278.4 cm. Copyright with the Estate of Nancy Spero

matters. The fact is that we can reasonably understand an energy that has qualities of compassion, caring, and healing as lying within the feminine. Like those women who lived and worked on the margins but were everywhere present and unacknowledged, the feminine has been everywhere disallowed, diminished, and overshadowed, but is everywhere our best hope.

CM: I think that there are many kinds of feminisms. We need to acknowledge the fact that there are as many feminisms as there are feminists. Each one of us has a personal definition of what feminism is and we should be able to discuss that, to share that, and to still be a unified group.

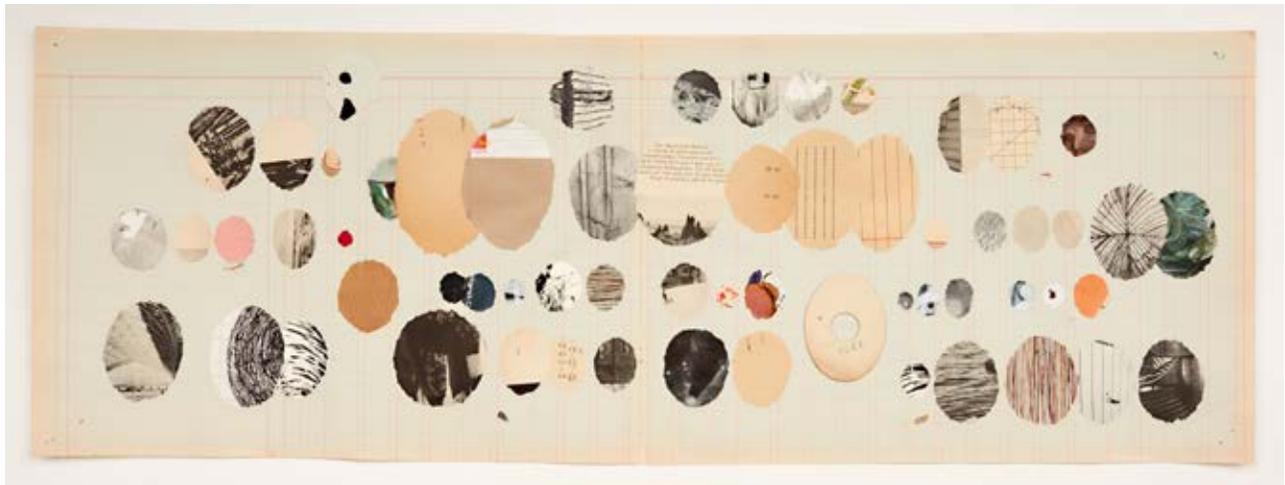
MR: I like that, Camille. Linda Nochlin told me once that feminists are feminists' worst enemies. I have certainly experienced that first-hand, as noted earlier. I'd like to make a proclamation that we stop this. We have a shared, common interest. Yes, it might be essentialist to present all-women exhibitions, but until women artists have a far stronger foothold in the system and have achieved equality in representation, it is important that we preserve these exhibitions, spaces, curatorial positions, including labels such as "black," "woman," or "queer," even though we may recognize that they are inherently essentialist, ghettoizing, exclusionary, and universalizing, and fail to account for important differences between and among artists' lived experiences. Gayatri Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism," as outlined in her book *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987), is particularly useful in

this context. For Spivak, groups may act temporarily "as if" their identities are stable in an effort to create solidarity, a sense of belonging and identity to a group, race, or ethnicity, for the purposes of social or political action. For instance, strategic essentialism might involve the bringing together of diverse agendas of various women's groups to work for a common cause, such as abortion rights or domestic violence. The Women's March on Washington in 2017, initiated by the uproar concerning Donald Trump's election as president of the USA, was a particularly powerful example of strategic essentialism: a million people—of every gender, ethnicity, and religion—came together as "women" protesting. Their causes and concerns were not identical by any means, but they united under an "essentialist" identity, that of women. So, in strategic essentialism, the "essential attributes" are acknowledged to be a construct—that is, the (political) group, somewhat paradoxically, acknowledges that the attributes (black, queer, woman, for example) are not intrinsically essential, but are invoked if they are considered to be strategically and politically useful. Moreover, members of the group maintain the power to decide when the attributes are "essential" and when they are not. In this way, strategic essentialism can be a potent political tool. While one could argue that all-women shows are ghettoizing or separatist, as with all identity-based exhibitions, there are benefits as well. Such exhibitions function as curatorial correctives and offer visibility to artists who have been marginalized. Yet, there is always the continued issue of intersectionality, which leads me to the question of race in relation

to feminist curatorial projects. In putting together this panel, I was really conscious of the fact that the curators who have organized the landmark exhibitions over the last fifty years have been white feminists with very few exceptions. And, I think this has to do obviously with the fact that, until recently, white, not BIPOC, women were in the positions of power to organize these exhibitions. Fortunately, now we have institutions who are hiring black and POC curators, but only recently. So, while sexism is clearly an issue, so is the continued racism. How do we grapple with this as feminists? How does race figure into your curatorial processes? Have any of you thought about that when you're curating exhibitions?

CM: I have. In 2016, I curated a show about African women artists at Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Le Havre.⁷ When I was working at the Centre Pompidou, it was clear that there were very little, if no, black women artists in the collection. There's also an enormous lack of information about African women artists that we have to address, as well as African-American, Indigenous, and other marginalized women artists. I believe firmly that there needs to be more scholarship and critical attention paid to black women artists. Without this information, there is no visibility.

RM: I have been working for many years in biennials, which are these transcultural events that exhibit artists



Simryn Gill, *Egg Drawing #48*, 2016; collage on paper, 30 x 86 cm. Copyright with the artist.



Simryn Gill, *Midden Mother*, 2020, Courtesy of the artist

from all over the world, so I'm always thinking about race, gender, class, and geopolitical contexts. I'm from the generation of curators that includes Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya for whom race has been a paramount issue. I remember one of the curators of the first Manifesta—Katalyn Neray—said that she was only thinking about quality and not if the work was produced by a man or a woman, by a white or a black person—as if neutrality could exist. But then, when we think about neutrality, and when we think about beauty or quality, we are typically thinking about the male paradigm, or the phallocratic and white paradigm. But quality is in fact a concept of exclusion elaborated from the hegemonic paradigm. So, we have to re-invent the concept of quality and beauty and learn that there are other kinds of beauty that we have to understand, that we have to learn how to enjoy. We need to look globally and learn to be touched by works and visions that are unfamiliar to us.

CdZ: Sometimes it's very difficult to include the artists who are unfamiliar or simply non-Western. You really have to fight for them and put your foot down and say no, these artists have to be included. It's not always easy.

Audience Questions and Comments

Kristen Diane Clifford: To the question about women not helping other women, it's a big topic of conversation for your generation, but hopefully less of an issue for younger people. There's a concept called "Shine Theory" that's relevant here. It means that we can shine and uplift each other collectively in order to move beyond a scarcity mindset into one of plenty. In other words, "I don't shine if you don't shine."

Lara Perry: All of you have worked in such different contexts over many decades. I wanted to ask the speakers what has changed over the time that you've all been working?

CM: Ten years ago, I had to justify myself for at least fifty percent of the time about why I curated *Elles*. What has changed today is I don't have to justify the fact that I'm curating a collective women artists exhibition. That's a huge change.

ASH: The one change I have noticed is that the cost of a good Artemisia Gentileschi has been rising up into the millions—which it never was before—and this is true of other women artists from the past. If good works by



Hannah Wilke, *Ponder-rosa Series 3: Double Sun (triangle) Blue Champagne (square), Broken Blossoms (circle)*, 1975. Latex with liquitex, metal snaps, and push pins, 15 sculptures. Copyright with the Estate of the artist

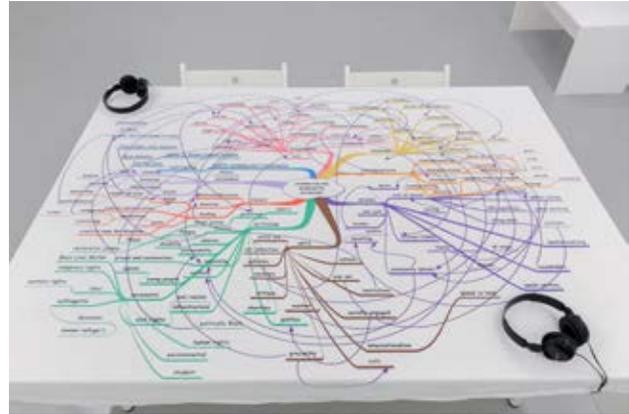
historic women artists come onto the market, they are very expensive. That tells you something about people's desire to own these works.

MR: If we're to go back to Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" when she argued that it was the art institutions and the education systems that needed to change drastically for women's status to improve within the art world, those have certainly shifted. We've seen tremendous change in the educational arena—with women representing the majority of MFA programs. Nonetheless, we still have so much further to go. Until we see progress trickle down into all aspects of the art world—solo exhibition schedules at museums, gallery representation, price differentials, press coverage, etc.—I will not be content.

Helena Reckitt: We do seem to be seeing a shift in terms of female artists, feminist artists, queer, etc., having representation in terms of being included in exhibitions and perhaps even collections. But, what about the broader impact of feminist critique and activism in the way that the art organizations are run? Because we've seen many examples where very radical artworks about childcare or sexual violence, racialized violence are displayed, but the conditions under which those works are presented actually perpetuate some patriarchal, neoliberal systems which are undermine feminized and racialized workers. These conditions exasperate the kind of feminized economy that is part of our precarious art world. So, I was also wondering what people could observe about how feminism could be applied on the level of structure, not just representation?

MR: So, instead of ‘talking the talk,’ institutions need to look internally and recognize they have underpaid labor, are not offering childcare for their workers, and are preserving white patriarchal, male-centric institutions. Not only are they overpaying their directors, but they are maintaining predominantly white, male exhibition schedules, while ignoring larger structural issues that need attending to. All of these sorts of inherently feminist caring opportunities are not being offered by institutions. Given that she runs a feminist organization, I’d like to hear from Daria about this.

DK: Having worked in different institutions in other countries, I’ve experienced all sorts of incoherences, to put it softly, between what I’ve seen behind the doors, in the offices, and the values an institution was proclaiming to support. For instance, total whiteness of the staff working in the artistic programming, while people of color are working in security and not getting tickets for lunch that other ‘artistic’ people were getting and had to eat in a different location. This inevitably led to a racial segregation within the institution—people working there didn’t mix. Once I was in an elevator with a person who was working as an intern and during their lunch break, they had to go get a special type of dessert for the director. The white team was organizing shows by artists of color and by female artists, both just within the required quota... and many more disturbing examples of this sort. When I founded Mimosa House, I wanted to make sure the principles of feminism were embedded in how the institution was run. One of the most emblematic shows for Mimosa House happened in 2018 and was titled *Do you keep thinking there must be another way*. The fundamental question we asked was how to remain and not to withdraw when you profoundly disagree with the system that you are also a part of. The show reflected on emotional, artistic, caring labors as under-valued and often not remunerated at all within the system of patriarchy. Important to mention, that the show was co-curated with my dear friends, Jessica Vaughan, Ellie Greig, and Cicely Farrer, who I met on a curatorial Master’s program and already back in 2011 where we shared interest in feminist methodologies. As a team of four curators, we wanted to reflect on how to implement our realities and ongoing personal experiences into working on this project for over a year. Three of us combined work on this project with other full time institutional jobs, one gave birth half way through the process, another had a three-year-old at home. We talked a lot about how an art institution can be organized following feminist principles and values that would enable curators, artists, and all people



Raju Rage, *Under/Valued Energetic Economy*, 2017–ongoing. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Tim Bowditch



Lee Lozano, *No title*, 1971, Pen on paper (facsimile). Courtesy of The Estate of Lee Lozano and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Tim Bowditch

involved in the process to combine their caring responsibilities and activist work with institutional and project-based work, and to feel appreciated. Our work as a feminist institution is also about constant re-evaluation of the language we use: the pronouns, as well as words which better describe our identities and our differences.

Peggy Phelan: I think it is crucial that these women address the ‘future.’ Recent transformations in museums from ethics of funders to sexism and racism of contemporary practices might mean that there is a genuine opening for feminist curation, or it might mean a repression of all political exhibitions. I would love to hear your predictions for the coming years and the future and how this might pan out.

DK: In terms of what I’ve experienced in running Mimosa House, under a feminist intersectional

umbrella, is the importance of very specific actions. So, we decided to list our planned actions publicly: we analyze the work we've done and what we want to change, choosing to be very transparent with our audiences. For example, back in June 2020 in the context of Black Lives Matter, we produced a list of action points that we were going to undertake as an institution, which included some interior changes, such as diversifying our advisory board. Also, as a public institution, it's important for us to be selective and responsible about who our funders are. Another thing which we are planning to do is a code of conduct which

we'll place right by the entrance to our gallery. We'll include that in our emails to people who sign up to our events to ensure that all people who come to Mimosa House feel safe and protected, as being a space for communities is as important as being an exhibition space. So, I believe we need more institutional transparency and specific actions—and to stick to them.

CdZ: Recently, when I was editing a book of my essays on women artists over the past twenty-five years, entitled *Women's Work is Never Done*,⁸ I was struck by the memories of wonderful friendships and by the



Tejal Shah, *Between the Waves*, 2012. Installation view, Mimosa House, London. Photo: Damian Griffiths.

deeper story that they traced. Not about my life, nor even just about the artists, but about a world that had always been hidden in plain sight. It was a story of empathy and relation shaping society, and of conversations that were to last a lifetime. The world it describes is not one in which women are the issue, but one in which the voices of women bring about and drive forward changes for the future that would once have been understood only at the margin. There is so much that is cruel and that threatens us, but women need to speak for life, hope, beauty, and resistance. That is our continuing struggle, and it is very encouraging to see how many young women artists from very diverse backgrounds, as mentioned before, are maintaining this legacy... On the future, on sisterhood!

CM: On the future...and on the past: one of the amazing discoveries we've had through AWARE's many symposiums and collective research, is that sisterhood among artists really started a century before we expect. Not in the 1960s, but most probably in the 1860s. It's a long, deep history of helping each other, and it happened in nearly every country and continent. This is something to remember!

RM: As to the future, I think we have to keep on doing this work because every twenty years or so there is a backlash against feminism. We need to keep reinventing the wheel. We must continue to reignite the conversation over and over again. Because it is a must and because it is good for our children and for the next generation. As the people from the Zapatistas Indigenous Communities from Chiapas (Mexico) state: "Cuando una mujer avanza no hay hombre que retroceda" ("A woman's step forward is never a man's step back").

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 - Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987).
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Notes

- 1** *Women Artists: 1950-1990 (1976)*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, December 21, 1976 -March 1977.
 - 2** *From La Tintoretta to Artemisia Gentileschi* (later titled *The Ladies of the Baroque*) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent (October 20, 2018-January 20, 2019).
 - 3** *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (2007), Brooklyn Museum, March 23–July 1, 2007, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin.
 - 4** *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 4–July 16, 2007, curated by Cornelia Butler.
 - 5** *Women House* (2017), *Monnaie de Paris*, Paris, October 20, 2017–January 28, 2018.
 - 6** Amelia Jones as quoted in *Curatorial Activism*, p. 60.
 - 7** *L'autre continent (The other continent) – Artistes, Femmes, Africaines* (2016), Museum d'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, Paris, September 15 – December 31, 2016.
 - 8** Catherine de Zegher, *Women's Work Is Never Done: An Anthology* (Ghent: AsaME, 2014).
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Camille Morineau is the co-founder and director of AWARE (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions), a French non-profit organization dedicated to the creation, indexation, and distribution of information on women artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. With degrees from both the École normale supérieure and the Institut national du patrimoine, she has worked for twenty years in public cultural institutions in France, including ten years as curator of the contemporary collections at the Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Georges-Pompidou (Paris). She has curated numerous exhibitions there, including *Yves Klein* (2006), *Gerhard Richter* (2012), *Roy Lichtenstein* (2013), and the display for *elles@centrepompidou*

(2009-2011) dedicated solely to female artists from the collections of the Musée national d'art moderne. She has also curated several exhibitions as a freelance curator, including *Niki de Saint Phalle* at RMN – Grand Palais (Paris, 2014) and Guggenheim Bilbao (2016), *Ceramix. From Rodin to Schütte*, about the use of ceramics by artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, at the Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht (2015) and La maison rouge, Fondation Antoine de Galbert, with Manufacture de Sèvres (Paris, 2016). From 2016 to October 2019, she was the director of exhibitions and collections at Monnaie de Paris, where she curated the following exhibitions: *Women House*, also shown at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington (2017-2018); *Floor-naments*, an exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of the Centre Pompidou (2017); *Subodh Gupta* (2018); *Thomas Schütte* (2019), and *Kiki Smith* (2019-2020).

Daria Khan is the curator of Mimosa House, an independent non-profit art institution that she founded in 2017 in London. Dedicated to artistic experimentation and collaboration, Mimosa House supports dialogue between intergenerational women and queer artists. Daria's recent curatorial projects include *Tender Touches*, Austrian Cultural Forum, London; *Mechanisms of Happiness* at Photographers Gallery, London; *Levitare* at Freiraum 21 International, MuseumsQuartier Vienna; the Public Program of the 5th Moscow Biennial, Moscow. Daria was a curator in residency at the MuseumsQuartier, Vienna and a participant of EUNIC program at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Daria participated in various talks and conferences, including Oxford University (Christ Church), School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Centre Pompidou. She received her MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art, London, and is currently undertaking the MPhil/PhD Art Programme at Goldsmiths University, London.

Catherine de Zegher is a Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts and was the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent (Belgium). In 2012, she was the Artistic Director of the 18th Biennale of Sydney, Australia, and in 2013 of the 5th Moscow Biennale, Russia. She curated the Australian Pavilion (Simryn Gill) at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, and the Belgian Pavilion (Thierry de Cordier) at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997. As Guest Curator in the Depart-

ment of Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, she organized the large-scale exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (2010-2011). From 2007-2009, de Zegher was the Director of Exhibitions and Publications at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Previous to this position, from 1999-2006, she was the Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Drawing Center in New York for many years. Before de Zegher took up her career in North America, she was the co-founder and Director of the Kanaal Art Foundation in Kortrijk, Belgium (1988-1998). De Zegher is the curator of many acclaimed historical and contemporary exhibitions, such as *America: Bride of the Sun. 500 Years of Latin America and the Low Countries* (1992) at the Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp; and *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (1994-1996) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Several of her projects and books promote the feminine principle. In the last twenty years, de Zegher has received Best Show awards from AICA and AAMC. Author and editor of numerous books on modern and contemporary artists, one of her publications is the October Book *Women Artists at the Millennium* co-edited with Carol Armstrong (MIT Press). In 2014, de Zegher published *Women's Work Is Never Done*, an anthology of her collected essays on the work of contemporary women artists. Most recently, in 2020, she published a sequel to *Inside the Visible*, for its 25th Anniversary, in a Dutch mook (magazine/book) *SeeAllThis #20*.

Rosa Martínez is an independent curator, writer, and art collections consultant. She lives in Barcelona where she obtained her degree in art history. She was curator of several major international biennials, including Istanbul, 1997; SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, 1999; Busan, Korea, 2000; São Paulo, 2006; Moscow, 2005-2007. In 2005, she was director of the 51st International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale with the exhibition *Always a Little Further* in the Arsenale, which made her — together with Maria de Corral, responsible for the Italian Pavilion — the first female director of this event in its 110-year history. Always with a feminist approach, she has also curated significant thematic exhibitions like *Fear Nothing, She Says. When Art Reveals Mystic Truths* (2015) devoted to the legacy of Saint Teresa of Avila, for the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid, Spain; *Intimacy is Political: Sex, Gender, Language, Power* (2017)

for the Centro Cultural Metropolitano in Quito, Ecuador, or *In the Name of the Father* (2019) at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, Spain. From 2004-2007, Martínez served as Chief Curator of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. In addition to curating many solo and group shows, she has also been a prolific lecturer and a regular contributor to numerous exhibition catalogues, art journals, and newspapers. She is currently writing a book on her curatorial visions and experiences.

Maura Reilly is a curator and arts writer who has organized dozens of exhibitions internationally with a specific focus on marginalized artists. She has written extensively on global contemporary art and curatorial practice, including, most recently *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), which was named a “Top 10 Best Art Book of 2018” by the *New York Times*. Her next book, *Museums & Social Justice*, is forthcoming from Thames & Hudson in 2022, followed by a textbook on feminist art, also with Thames & Hudson. Reilly is the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she developed and launched the first exhibition and public programming space in the USA devoted entirely to feminist art. While there, she organized several landmark exhibitions, including the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, the blockbuster *Global Feminisms* (co-curated with Linda Nochlin), and *Ghada Amer: Love Had No End, Burning Down the House*, among others. Other notable exhibitions include *Miriam Schapiro: An American Visionary*, *Richard Bell: Uz v. Them*, *Nayland Blake: Behavior*, *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became*, *La Mirada Iracunda (The Furious Gaze)*, *Neo-Queer*, among others. She is a co-founder of two initiatives dedicated to fighting discrimination against women in the art world—The Feminist Art Project (TFAP) and Feminist Curators United (FcU). She received her M.A. and PhD in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and is an Editor-at-Large for *The Brooklyn Rail*. Dr. Reilly is an Associate Professor of Art History and Museum Studies at Arizona State University.

Crossed Perspectives on Collaboration

Ève Chabanon, Anna Colin, and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker

This conversation brings together Ève Chabanon, Anna Colin, and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker, three collaborators, art-workers, and friends. Anna and Ève met in 2016 at Open School East (OSE) first located in London, then in Margate, Kent; Anna was co-founder of the school, and Ève, an associate artist. Their collaboration with Madeleine really took shape in 2018 at Lafayette Anticipations, a private foundation dedicated to artistic production in Paris. There, Anna served as associate curator; Madeleine, head of communications; and Ève, a guest artist, invited by Anna, for the group show *The Centre Cannot Hold*.

For the purposes of this article, Anna extended her *OnCurating* invitation to Ève and Madeleine, to discuss three different projects in which they acted as artist, curator, facilitator, researcher. Though Lafayette Anticipations served as a space for their three-way encounter, the projects introduced below mainly stem from other locations—namely, OSE for Anna's example, Women Safe for Madeleine's, and a consortium of venues (both physical and immaterial) for Ève's. These relational spaces reflect the contributors' hybrid commitments to initiatives outside of dedicated art institutions and, most importantly, to the people who help co-construct such projects. They also bear witness to the authors' changing roles in their personal histories.

The situated and collaborative qualities of these projects serve as adhesive when considering them in dialogue. What they question in terms of community-making and social justice transformation, specifically through an arts-based practice, sheds light on the challenges and possibilities of such initiatives. By intersecting these perspectives through the following conversation, Ève, Anna, and Madeleine are curious to observe what (un)learnings, strategies, and paths might emerge and converge from these projects, and inform others to come.

Let's start by introducing our projects and situating ourselves within them.

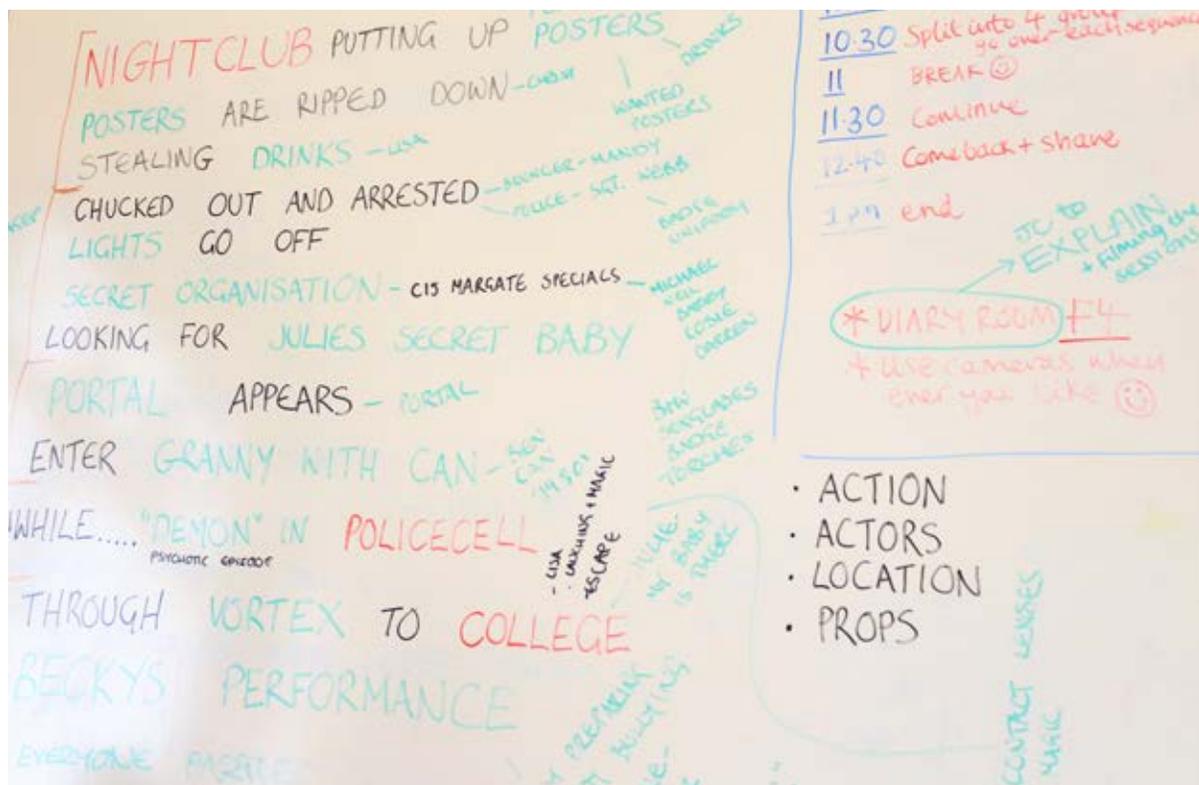
Madeleine Planeix-Crocker (MP-C): The project I'd like to turn to is an ongoing collaboration with Women Safe, a safe space for womxn survivors and/or witnesses of violence founded in 2014; since 2017, children have also been welcomed in this not-for-profit organisation. Located in greater Paris, Women Safe is dedicated to accompanying victims toward a personalised reconstructive process by providing free services and care, including psychological, medical, and legal consultations. I came to Women Safe in 2017 as a performance and gender studies Master's candidate with long-term experience in community-based theatre-making, and as someone who had also experienced sexual assault. Through my research project, I hoped to study the role an arts practice could assume in a post-traumatic reconstructive process for womxn. As a volunteer at Women Safe, I was able to develop a creative writing and theatre workshop. Though the group was shapeshifting in number, a core cohort of six participants showed up every week for this experimental project, the research component of which was disclosed in full from the onset. I shared the hopes and hypotheses of this action-based research endeavour with the group and asked for their consent to participate in it. The group's age range was twenty to seventy years old; its participants had experienced a spectrum of intersectional violences based on gender, race, class, and physical disability, such as psychological, economic, sexual assault and/or harassment. I'm referring here to the first chapter of a project represented by two years of fieldwork and volunteering at Women Safe, leading to a community-based performance devised with the workshop participants.

Ève Chabanon (EC): Similarly, *The Surplus Of The Non-Producer* was designed as a long-term project. Started in 2016 in Paris, the project revolves around the economic category of surplus. "Surplus" in economics is a term that refers to the difference between the amount a producer would be willing to accept for a good and what they actually get by selling it following the market

price. The project gathers craftspeople, artists, and other cultural workers who find themselves in exile due to migration, and thereby encounter difficulties in pursuing their profession. After several years, six participants are still closely involved: Nassima Shavaeva, a Uighur dancer and singer from Kazakhstan; Olivier Iturerere, a film and television producer from Burundi; Aram Ikram Taştekin, an actor from Turkish Kurdistan; Abdulmajeed Haydar, a Palestinian scriptwriter from Syria; Abou Dubaev, a stuccoer from Chechnya; and Yara Al Najem, a graphic designer from Syria. Together, we set up a kind of informal cooperative, a “think tank” geared toward transcultural exchange of knowledge and skills; it also served to help in the development of a community. With time and multiple steps, we have shaped a range of collaborations manifested by objects, videos, workshops, and writings.

Anna Colin (AC): The project I’ll talk about is more short-term than yours, but it did have longer-term ambitions, which I’ll return to later. The project involved the making of a short collaborative science-fiction film over the course of three months, during the summer of 2019, by and with a dozen members of Getting On with Learning Difficulties (GOLD),¹ a group associated with the charity East Kent Mencap (EKM) in Margate.

A few independent participants, also with learning difficulties, joined the project when it kicked off in July, but were not part of the initial conversations. The project was a partnership with Open School East (OSE)—an independent art school and community space also based in Margate, which I co-founded and was directing at the time—and with artist Jemma Cullen, who had recently joined OSE’s year-long development programme. If I was involved in the early conception of the project, I did not participate in its delivery (Jemma handled that part), which positions me differently to the two of you again. My role in comparison was more institutional, and, in fact, the project was born out of a desire for two organisations, EKM and OSE, to work together. The GOLD group had attended a workshop at OSE the previous year and had complained that the structure of the day and the way it was run were wholly inadequate for people with learning difficulties. We had therefore agreed to meet to discuss how OSE could make itself more accessible and whether we might work together in future. I came to that first meeting accompanied by Jemma. In the space of two hours during which the GOLD members made recommendations and expressed their desires as well as wild ideas, the terms of the collaborative project² were set.



Whiteboard notes, week 5 at Open School East, 2019. Photography by Louis Palfrey

Let's unpack some discussion points and common themes that might connect our respective projects. Shall we start with the projects' qualities and modalities/processes, set-ups/mobilised tools?

MP-C: Certainly! To begin, let me mention one of the workshop "constants," namely the time dedicated within the group to shared readings of plays, as well as of poetry, essays, manifestos. We also listened to songs, and watched films. Then, based on some of my training in feminist theatre practices, I was able to propose specialised improv and live action role-playing exercises, as well as physical and vocal warm-ups to nurture confidence in these embodied practices, which were initially met with fear, shyness, or shame. Indeed, when dealing with physical assault, for example, the body can be experienced as a "borderland"³: a knowledge site with feeling memories of times before trauma, and of times after. The shift between these moments, where violence serves as the cruel pivot, is razor-thin. I also devised exercises to facilitate the transposition of orally expressed memories, impressions, and convictions into written words; the participants would choose what subjects they wanted to tackle, pertaining to their personal experience(s) of violence, or not. Starting with individual words and slowly making their way to sentences and then to fully-fledged texts, the participants finally composed original monologues.

EC: On my part, when I started working on *The Surplus of the Non-Producer*, I was in the process of finishing two significant projects. One was *G Body Work*, a two-year project involving a group of young men studying to become auto mechanics in a vocational high school in a Parisian suburb. *G Body Work* was built on intensive, collective research on self-determination in labour, using moonlighting as a pretext for discussions and actions. The other project was the culmination of a residency at The White House in Dagenham, greater London, where I had been invited to spend six months after "graduating" from OSE. *Anti-Social Social Club: Episode One, The Chamber of the Dispossessed* took the form of a public debate on the topic of dispossession in the Council Chamber of the nearby Barking Town Hall. The event involved a cross-section of the local community and brought into conversation the problematic nature of authoritarianism and crowd manipulation often used in public meetings. By doing so, the project questioned democratic processes and the power of "the public." When Lafayette Anticipations commissioned me in 2016, they put me in touch with Thot, a French language school for people in exile in Paris; in a way, this

gave the project its starting point, as I ended up volunteering for Thot for six months. Through this experience, I realised that most of the learners were unable to practise their original trade, as their identity was reduced to being "migrants". So, the first impulse of the project was to try and facilitate access to labour for people in exile and more especially from my community, that is, from the fields of art and culture. This led me to set up an informal network of Paris-based social workers, lawyers, activists, and thinkers working for the social, legal, and professional enhancement and survival of this population in exile. The project came together slowly, and with a lot of questions regarding my role or even my presence in this particular context. So, it was much less spontaneous to what you seem to have experienced, Anna.

AC: The project is different in that GOLD is a ready-made community, but it did feel spontaneous, as you say; it was as if we all knew that collaboration would only work if it was to be steered by the participants. During that first meeting, every member introduced their learning and creative interests, and one member circulated the results of a survey they had recently undertaken about the activities the group was keen on pursuing. Filmmaking being on top of the list, we discussed working on a movie together. A few members shared their love of the British TV programme *The Undateables*, which follows people with a long-term health condition on their dates. The conversation quickly drifted towards the necessity for more storytelling platforms for people who are invisibilised on account of their disability. The film would give voice not only to the life stories of the GOLD members, but also to their imagination and creativity. So, it was quite an organic process, and while we were waiting for the funding to come through, we had back and forths about the structure of the project: how often would we meet (once a week for three hours) and where (would OSE, as a new environment, feel safe enough?); what specific skills and steps were required to make the film happen (e.g. camera skills, scriptwriting, storyboarding, location scouting, costume and prop-making, role-playing, etc.); and where would the film premiere. Jemma took on the role of creative organiser, facilitator, and cheerleader, and invited other OSE artists with relevant skills to run sessions on film- and costume-making, prop and stage design, and acting. The film was a quasi-complete collaboration; editing had to be done separately because twelve three-hour long sessions weren't enough to do that work.



Project participants, artists, organiser and MC at the screening of *A Night to Remember*, 2019. Photograph by Anna Colin.

Can we discuss the outcomes of these projects so far and how have they been shared?

MP-C: Similarly to what you just described, Anna, the Women Safe participants also made a collective decision: to proceed with a live performance of their monologues for their families, friends, and facilitators. Thus began the collaborative staging of their texts. Labouring within the safe space and with zero budget, the group chose to inhabit the offices of consenting staff workers. Rehearsing during the staff's lunch breaks, the participants re-entered these spaces where they had been welcomed by care-workers and service providers. New imaginaries were born from scenographies crafted with the participants' selected props: family photos, bedside books, talismans, and candles were placed near OBGYN pamphlets, on top of the massage table, in front of the French penal code. The participants' monologues spoke to these objects, through these objects, that served as anchor or proof of a time, a feeling, a wound. During each rehearsal, the participants took notes and exchanged feedback. We could sense the group shift into a shape of shared intention, marked by mutualised resources and fuelled by desire, fantasy—another name for “community.” Or, a manifestation perhaps of seeing-being seen in solidarity. As described by the participants, it was the radical gesture of opening,⁴ sharing their stories on their own terms with guests that allowed them to step more assuredly into their survivorhood.

AC: I'll jump in here because I recognise some similarities in that the project participants also used perfor-

mance—in their case, in film—to express themselves in ways they had not necessarily been able to before. By choosing to make a wacky science fiction film, they were able to tell a different story about—and present a different image of—themselves, and break the stigma surrounding their persons. The film, titled *A Night to Remember: The World Turned Upside Down*, premiered in a beautiful room of the theme park Dreamland, in Margate. The premiere was for the participants, the organisers, and the artists who had led sessions as well as their friends and families. It was quite a spectacle: the group wanted it to be like a cinema experience as well as an award ceremony, so we had popcorn cones, a red carpet, speeches, flowers, and official photographers, and a master of ceremony handed everyone their award. It was a highly emotional experience.

EC: On our side, the first step was to find a way for everyone to express themselves without having to talk *about* themselves. The first outcome was the collaboration with Abou Dubaev, a stucco master who was then working with La Fabrique Nomade, an organisation dedicated to the professional rehabilitation of craftspeople in exile. At the time, Abou was producing a variety of small decorative objects, but his ability and experience resided in creating stucco palaces in Russia. I took on the role of facilitator between Abou's skills and Lafayette Anticipations' political, media, and artistic power. After helping him source materials and set up a workshop in the institution, we created a table made of an artfully marbled stucco panel on plywood stands, which was so versatile in form and tonality that Abou was able to use and demonstrate his range of techniques through it. As



Ève Chabanon and Abou Dubaev, production still, 2018. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations.



Ève Chabanon and Abou Dubaev, production still, 2018. Courtesy of Lafayette Anticipations.

part of the arrangement, Lafayette temporarily employed Abou and put him on the payroll, using part of the budget earmarked for the exhibition. This contract not only provided Abou with the necessary documents and funds to access social housing and further employment, it also allowed him to dedicate himself to his art production, while creating a surplus. The table, which was shown in a group exhibition, became a monument, a territory in common, a stage, a conversation piece where we could gather and start the second part of the project. This was a film that would weave together the respective abilities of the members of the informal cooperative, while providing them with an income and the paperwork that came with it, thus proving helpful for their asylum-seeking

applications. I commissioned Abdulmajeed Haydar, who used to write TV series and films, to write a script that would bring together his favourite characters featured in his career. Then I asked him if he could find a way to make them meet in a story where the other members of the project could perform. We also studied the repertoire of singer and project participant Nassima Shavaeva in order to compose a soundtrack. In parallel, we organised and filmed a few events which, at one point, would feature in the film. One of them was a private encounter and conversation, around the stucco table, between the group members and Katherine Gibson, an economist internationally known for her research on rethinking economies as sites of ethical action.



Workshop participants and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker at Women Safe, 2019. Photograph by Maxime Fieschi. Courtesy of Le Parisien.

Shall we now discuss the challenges of these projects?

AC: The challenges we met, both social and spatial, have made me reconsider the responsibilities of social practice and of institutions engaged in it. If employees and volunteers of EKM were present at the sessions, it did not make up for both Jemma's and OSE staff's lack of experience in working with adults with learning difficulties. As I've mentioned before, there were also a few independent participants who did not have the support structure that GOLD members had, due to their affiliation with the group and EKM. Certain situations were hard to handle, and the fact that we sometimes had trouble accessing a breakout space for participants to let off steam, gather their thoughts and emotions, or talk to someone in private, created difficulties. This experience highlights what I see as a major challenge with social practice today, which is the inadequacy of artists and art institutions' ability to work with vulnerable individuals and communities. And I only blame institutions for it (my own including), as they have been pushing artists into territories that bear no relation to their base of knowledge and experience. In the UK context, this tendency is a direct consequence of the fact that the government has made it a condition of their funding that art institutions and artists take on a socially useful role in order to make up for the decline in welfare provision. I believe that without substantial training and/or experience in social care—organised and paid for by institutions for artists

and art-workers—meaningful and sustainable engagement between artists/art-workers and underserved groups can neither take place comfortably, nor safely.

MP-C: That really resonates with my project experience, Anna. Indeed, as I'm not a trained art therapist, I relied on close collaboration with my colleagues at Women Safe, namely the psychologists, to better understand and learn to address some of the individual difficulties that arose within the workshop. On this point, I'd say that the writing part of the journey was particularly fraught, electric, and ultimately galvanising. No word was taken for granted, as it could be the site of a personal battlefield, triggering suppressed hurt, or pointing to shattered dreams. We could witness together the pervasiveness of violence in language itself. In the end, each participant chose to "stay with the trouble"⁵—to embrace what arose, to expose, to re-place—as they discussed an experience of violence in their monologue. Instead of proceeding to a testimonial as is (forcibly) required by various re-traumatising institutions of law or medicine, they turned to the examples of performative disidentifications⁶ explored together in our readings. These examples served as protection and inspiration for the participants as they made new (read: their own) meaning of lived events. It's also important to note that each step of the writing process was shared with the other participants, through personal readings, followed by extensive and mutually supportive discussions.

EC: I think it's interesting to point out that you and Anna are working from the inside of organisations. You are acting in collaboration with professionals in the social care sector. Personally, I'm working on the outside, or rather in the continuity of what the organisations I met at the beginning of the project already provide. Also, to go back to the question of challenges, I would say that there is a never-ending list of interrogations that we have continuously grappled with. The most recent ones would be: How does cultural and artistic work actually manifest itself? Does it necessarily result in an end product, an object through which the value of the work can be attested and measured? How do you measure the right level of inclusion and participation? Working in a collective requires constant questioning about one's motivation and intention; in other words, identifying and weighing individual risks and power relations on all sides. Systemic imbalances and internalised patterns of thought and behaviour can be overcome only through self-reflection and tireless reshaping.

What is the legacy, or next steps, of these projects, if any?

MP-C: So much has happened since the first chapter of this project! Each workshop participant was able to move toward other activities outside of Women Safe, another positive step within a reconstructive process. I'd also like to point out another outcome of the project: the resources explored in the workshop were pooled collectively and gave shape to our "Bibliography in (Re)Construction," perhaps our own version of a "feminist toolkit" as imagined by Sara Ahmed.⁷ Though my Master's is now complete, my commitment to the workshop remains active to this day. To my great joy, a new cohort of participants has come into existence. On a personal level, this collaborative experience particularly challenged my locatedness as an intersectional feminist research-practitioner, and an "intimate insider."⁸ Through it, I learned—am still learning—to "stand with the colleagues"⁹ met along this co-constructed journey, which inspired my PhD topic pertaining to community-based performances. For this thesis project, I chose to shift research contexts and to focus my attention on initiatives programmed *within* art institutions—a partial result of my new responsibilities as associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations. This is how I came to explore your collaborative project, Ève, as a PhD case study. Indeed, as you describe above, *The Surplus* is in constant negotiation with art institutions, but also with the "art institution" as a normative concept, rife with tensions and, at times, possibilities.

EC: *The Surplus* was presented in exhibition form at Bétonsalon in Paris and at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster in 2020, and this was very challenging partly for the reasons you are pointing out, Madeleine. However, the exhibitions also brought attention to the project and, as a result, we managed to get a few grants which will hopefully help us finish the film. This final outcome will be about the project as a whole; part-fiction, part-documentary. We are also working with the abovementioned institutions on a book gathering the extended community which made the project possible—a book that you are both part of, for that matter. While the film project was on pause, we all stayed in contact; I guess friendship took over, which also brought a different tonality to our collaboration.

AC: Unlike your projects, the one I've been discussing had a fixed temporality, but as the project went along, it became clear that all parties wanted to take the collaboration further. Those invited to share their professional skills during the sessions and not already employed by EKM and OSE—i.e., Jemma and four colleagues of hers—had been paid for their labour. As the participants acquired new skills and gained in confidence, they would sometimes jokingly say that they should start charging for their expertise and participation in the film. The participants' comments about free labour prompted a conversation about the economics of participation in the arts and, much inspired by Ève's own thoughts with *The Surplus*, we discussed the possibility of setting up a cooperative for GOLD members and the non-affiliated project participants to deliver creative projects for and with a range of institutions—universities, local councils, arts organisations—for pay. This idea also came out of the fact that, on the back of the film, GOLD was contacted to participate, unremunerated, in projects which they had had no input in conceiving. The members were being instrumentalised by organisations in a blatant box-ticking exercise. The idea with the cooperative was to get funding for a couple of years for GOLD members to first undertake specialised training in areas they wished to develop skills and knowledge in. A website would then be built to advertise the services the cooperative would offer, and outreach to a range of institutions to seek commissions from would be done. The cooperative would not only be a way of mutualising resources, but also the vehicle through which members could invoice and draw dividends without affecting their State benefits. Legal advice would be sought to ensure this. However, this project, at least in the form just outlined, did not go beyond the stage of initial discussions

between EKM, one member of GOLD, OSE and Jemma, and wasn't put to the whole group. Covid got underway and more urgent wellbeing work took over what was deemed too complex a project. That said, the collaboration between EKM, GOLD and Jemma continues to this day. Jemma is currently employed by EKM, and the idea of the cooperative, albeit in a different form, has been reactivated. In addition, last year Jemma worked with another artist and a few GOLD members for an online project on the subject of care at Almanac in London.¹⁰ So, the initial project has a multi-layered legacy.

What learnings have you gathered from these initiatives that might resonate with the project of "instituting feminism"?

MP-C: I suppose Women Safe could be an example of an intersectional feminist institution, not by self-proclaimed definition, but in action; specifically, it is a place in which a community-based art practice found its place and, most importantly, its purpose.¹¹ Perhaps this is a way of shifting our attention to other specialised spaces that impart their own located learnings, namely with regard to establishing safe practices *with* vulnerable participants. For the Women Safe workshop group, similarly to your projects, Ève and Anna, this meant negotiating limited or non-existent economic resources to create a performance, and thus to focus on other typologies of commons (individual and group know-how, desires, time, and available space). As such, having devised our own "emergent strategies"¹² in action and armed with their teachings, we might then return to the dedicated art institution, where we also work, ready to unlearn its doctrines and doings. This is what I hope to do within the space of the *Warm Up Sessions* I curate at Lafayette Anticipations, an embodied, collective, and all-level practice shared by the participants with a guest artist. My goal is to use this privilege and the platform to which I have access as a resource for inviting, collaborating with, and paying artists, while welcoming participants. Perhaps this is a way to both perform self and institutional critique, and to inform different modes of commoning—with artists, art-workers, and audiences.

AC: I feel at home with the term intersectional feminist institution and such an institution, to follow Sara Ahmed, is helpfully imagined as an organism. If one organ thrives, the others are well positioned to thrive, too; in turn, if one fails, the others will sooner or later start feeling the effects. In my PhD research, I am

looking, among other things, at holistic institutional approaches in the UK from the late 19th century to the present, and they appear to be hard to come by. In the UK context, non-profit arts organisations relying on public funding are unlikely to manage any form of holism; at best, their projects and programmes are bold, but they will always be in tension with the organisation's business, funding and reporting plans. Organisations I have been studying, which have managed a semblance of holism, if only for a time, were unsurprisingly cooperatives; this is, for instance, the case of the bookshop, café, and civic centre Centerprise (1971-2012) in East London, which was run as a cooperative between 1974 and 1993. The feminist art institution's code of practice, put together by Tereza Stejskalová, outlines, among other elements, the need for consistency between the institution's internal operations and its public/programming output; to be (self-)critical; and to pay attention to "feminist theory attributes to care."¹³ I think that summarises our interests, efforts, and struggles, but I would reiterate that care cannot be thought of in purely conceptual terms and that the remuneration not just of freelancers and artists, but also of participants—who cannot always afford the time to engage with art institutions, and yet add significant social capital to them—is a necessary conversation to have.

Notes

1 The structure and outcomes of the project (film and making of) can be viewed here: <https://openschooleast.org/events/what-do-art-and-music-have-to-do-with-life-stories-and-dating-june-september-2019/>.

Accessed 15 February 2021.

2 Ibid.

3 See: Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (California: Auntie Lute, 2012, 25th edition).

4 See: bell hooks, "CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS," *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* 36 (1989): 15–23.

5 See: Donna J Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2016).

6 See: José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

7 See: Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017).

8 See: Dana Cuomo & Vanessa A. Massaro, "Boundary-Making in Feminist Research: New Methodologies for 'Intimate Insiders,'" *Gender, Place & Culture* 23, no. 1 (2016): 94–106.

9 See: Kim TallBear, “Standing With and Speaking as Faith: A Feminist-Indigenous Approach to Inquiry,” *Journal of Research Practice* 10, no. 2 (2014): NA.

10 <http://almanacprojects.com/public-programme/short-films-by-essie-lisa-and-ben>. Accessed 11 March 2021.

11 See: Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (New York: Verso, 2020).

12 See: aimee maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (California: AK Press, 2017).

13 See: Tereza Stejskalová, *Feminist Art Institution. A Code of Practice* (Self-published, 2017), accessed 15 February 2021, https://www.academia.edu/35492650/Feminist_Art_Institution_A_Code_of_Practice?email_work_card=title.

Madeleine Planeix-Crocker (b. Los Angeles, 1993) is a French-American researcher and curator, currently based in Paris. She is associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations where she founded the *Warm Up Sessions*, a series of public and participatory gatherings around spontaneous and experimental practices in performance. She has also proposed the *Dérives* cycle that hopes to contribute to the writing of new histories of art through co-constructed dialogues with contemporary artists. Her interests rest namely at the crossroads of research and curation of feminist, queer, and intersectional performances. Madeleine is also co-director of the “Troubles, Dissidences et Esthétiques” Chair at the Beaux-Arts de Paris and is a permanent member of the Scientific Committee on Research at the ESAD de Reims. She received her Bachelor of Arts in cultural studies from Princeton University as well as a Master’s in Media, Arts & Creation from HEC Paris. Her second Master’s at the EHESS was an arts-based research project on feminist performances and brave spaces, led at Women Safe, where she still organises a theatre and creative writing workshop. Madeleine is currently pursuing a PhD at the EHESS (CRAL), analysing contemporary community-based performances programmed in French cultural institutions. She has been training in dance and theatre since childhood.

Anna Colin is an independent curator, educator, and researcher based in Deal, Kent. Alongside her freelance activities, which straddle the curatorial and the pedagogical and increasingly engage the natural environment and open spaces, Anna is training in horticulture and garden design, while

completing a PhD in the School of Geography at the University of Nottingham. Her doctoral research unpacks the notion of the alternative in multi-public educational organisations from the late 19th century to the present, in the UK and further afield. Anna was a co-founder and director of Open School East, an independent art school and community space in London then Margate (2013-20). She worked as associate curator at Lafayette Anticipations in Paris (2014-20), associate director at Bétonsalon – Centre for Art and Research, Paris (2011-12), and curator at Gasworks, London (2007-10). Anna has curated projects and exhibitions at venues including CA2M, Móstoles/Madrid; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Contemporary Image Collective, Cairo; La Synagogue de Delme, Delme; La Maison pop, Montreuil; and The Women’s Library, London. In 2015-16, Anna was co-curator, with Lydia Yee, of British Art Show 8. In autumn 2021, she started a position as lecturer on the MA Curating at Goldsmiths. <http://annacolin.co.uk/>

Ève Chabanon (b. 1989, France) lives and works in Brussels. They graduated from the Haute École des Arts du Rhin (HEAR) in Strasbourg in 2013, before obtaining a Master’s in Curating at the Sorbonne Université in Paris in 2014 and participating in the Open School East programme in London and Margate in 2016. They took part in several residencies, including at the White House in Dagenham in 2017, the FRAC Grand Large in Dunkirk in 2018, and Te Whare Hera in Wellington, New Zealand, where they presented her first solo exhibition, *Eating Each Other*, in 2019. They were awarded the Prix Sciences Po for contemporary art in 2018 for her project *The Anti-Social Social Club: Episode One, The Chamber of the Dispossessed*. Chabanon’s works have been shown in France at the Palais de Tokyo (2018), at Parc Saint Léger (2016), and the CAC Chanot, Clamart (2019). Other chapters of *The Surplus of the Non-Producer* were presented at Lafayette Anticipations (2018), Bétonsalon - Centre d’art et de recherche, Paris (2020), and Westfälischer Kunstverein, Münster (2020).

When in Doubt... Ask: Feminists Take on the Museum Retrospective

Erin L. McCutcheon

"I feel fairly confident that I know how to write an essay as a feminist, less sure I know how to install art as one."¹

Is there a space for doubt within the institutions of art and its histories? The above quotation is taken from the essay "How to Install Art as a Feminist" included in the catalogue for MoMA's 2010 exhibition, *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*. Here, US-American curator Helen Molesworth acknowledged the question many committed to feminist approaches to art history, myself included, are often too anxious to admit asking: do I know what I am doing? She understands which theories to work from as a feminist curator and which practices she does not wish to replicate. However, she is still unsure of what exactly installing art as a feminist looks like. What form should this practice take? Molesworth did not offer a roadmap of best practices, but made some suggestions for curators, in particular the potential for a feminist narration of histories that emerged from notions of horizontality and alliance, rather than traditional vertical formats that highlighted progression and the concept of singular genius. But what might these interventions look like when they transition from the conceptual realm of scholarship into the concrete physical space of the museum? How do curators put the world of critical theoretical discourse into practice in actually curating artwork, writing interpretation, engaging an audience, exhibiting an artist into history? What is a feminist curatorial praxis?²

In 2007, British art historian Griselda Pollock proposed the "virtual feminist museum," a counter-museum that allowed for a space of encounter between artworks free from the constraints of tradition, hierarchy, and commodification inherent to contemporary art institutions. A centerpiece of this virtual feminist museum, however, was that it could never be actual. She argued the "dominant social and economic power relations that govern the museum make feminist analysis impossible."³ Is it possible to institute feminisms, or is this only ever a virtual potentiality? Opportunities for centering feminist histories in the museum continue to present themselves and continue to raise these ongoing questions and uncertainties. This has perhaps been most visible within the surge of major international retrospective exhibitions of feminist creativity and women's artistic practices over the past fifteen years.⁴ This current moment of visibility makes the imperatives outlined by Helena Reckitt and Dorothee Richter in this issue so timely. How do we move beyond critique and towards transformation, structural change, and practical strategies of instituting feminisms? The majority of these recent exhibitions have been group shows that sought to narrate a wide span of international histories of feminist creativity using the works of a variety of producers.⁵ A distinct feature of the works assembled in these exhibitions has been the presence of collective and collaborative forms of art practice. Certain artists included in these historical overviews have arguably become more visible than others despite the importance of collaboration within their work. For example, US-American artists Judy Chicago and Suzanne Lacy, and Mexican artist Mónica Mayer have since become synonymous with

“feminist art,” itself a contested term, in their respective locations.⁶ Each of these artists has also been officially acknowledged by major institutions in the last five years with an overdue career retrospective.⁷ While there is a real need and desire to celebrate the achievements of these makers as individuals, the format of the career retrospective presents a unique set of problems for feminist curating not present within group exhibitions.

The format of the career retrospective replicates key mechanisms, power structures, and discourses of art history that feminists have worked to deconstruct and upend.⁸ A retrospective is rooted in the notion of the artist as a singular genius whose career can be understood through a linear chronology of their life and works. Retrospectives are gestures of surveying the past and as such seek to outline the trajectory of a career that is ending in ways that establish its significance in a larger art historical narrative. The creation of a canon of “great” feminist artists is an obvious issue for those interested in implementing feminist strategies. These issues become all the more complex when considering the centrality of collective forms of artmaking to the careers of these artists. Pollock argued that critical feminist studies must operate “outside of the museal categories of nation, style, period, movement, master, oeuvre, so that artworks can speak of something more than either the abstract principles of form and style or the individualism of the creative author.”⁹

What concrete shape would such a critical feminist approach to curating a career retrospective take? Is the concept of a retrospective in all its linearity, singularity, and progression simply antithetical to feminist histories? Or can certain strategies be undertaken that effectively account for the achievements of an artist whose practices were indelibly interwoven with collective creativity? I offer here the exhibition, *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer* (*When in Doubt... Ask: a Retrocollective Exhibition of Mónica Mayer*, 2016), as a case study in feminist curators and artists taking on the museum retrospective within an institutional environment. The exhibition, its planning, staging, and programming, provides useful examples of strategies for disrupting certain aspects of the retrospective format that stand in opposition to feminist imperatives for art history.

Mónica Mayer has been a central figure in Mexico City’s art world since the 1970s. Heralded as a pioneer in performance art, she has worked throughout her career to bring feminist issues to the forefront of the art world and public discourse. Her projects have continually forged local and transnational connections with artists and activists that cross generations. Working collectively and collaboratively is at the forefront of her practice. She notably formed the first feminist art collective in Mexico, Polvo de Gallina Negra, with the artist Maris Bustamante in 1983, and continues to work collectively with her husband, the artist Victor Lerma, as the collective Pinto mi Raya, formed in 1989. Her individual practice flourished alongside these collective strategies, and she amassed an immense amount of work, primarily drawing and collage, and also published extensively on topics of feminism and performance art in Mexico.¹⁰

Si tiene dudas... pregunte was curated by Karen Cordero Reiman, who, in addition to being a notable art historian, writer, and curator in Mexico, is also Mayer’s friend and long-time feminist collaborator. Mayer herself was central to the curatorial process, and their established working relationship, built around shared feminist goals, formed a productive platform for executing the exhibition. Cordero Reiman and Mayer made conscious decisions to disrupt traditional hierarchies within the curatorial process



Fig. 1 Mónica Mayer, *Performance parásito (Parasite Performance)*, IV Encuentro de Arte Corporal, Venezuela, 2008. Photo courtesy of Consuelo Méndez.

from planning to implementation: “We wanted there to be difference in a feminist exhibition, not just in terms of the content but in terms of power relations, dynamics and space. In making curatorial decisions, we thought about what the exhibition does, as opposed to what it says.”¹¹ When Cordero Reiman speaks as “we,” she is not only referring to herself and Mayer, but also to a number of collaborators from outside the institution, interns, community members, activists, and early career researchers such as myself, who were invited to be involved in the curatorial process.¹²

The title of the exhibition refers to two central organizing principals in the curatorial process: doubt and collectivity. The phrase “Si tiene dudas... pregunte” (When in doubt... ask) was drawn from a work entitled *Performance parásito (Parasite Performance)*, 2005–ongoing) by Pinto mi Raya. This work involved Mayer and Lerma attending other artists’ performances in public spaces and “parasitically” creating their own performance alongside (fig. 1). They held signs that read “when in doubt... ask” in order to start conversations with already present members of the audience.

The work was generated from what Mayer identified as the confusion audiences often feel when attending a performance or attempting to understand works of contemporary art. Their goal was not to exploit or overshadow the other performers, but to engage their audience in dialogue about what they were seeing in an effort to build deeper and collaborative understanding. She explained:

I am interested in the relationship between performance art and its audience. I obviously never tell people what they are seeing or interpret it for them, but I invite them to express their ideas, even if they have no idea what performance is, which is usually the case. This piece has taught me a lot. To begin with, not to be condescending towards non-art audiences, whose opinions are often right on the spot.¹³

With this performance, Mayer and Lerma created a critical space for uncertainty, a key aspect of Mayer's practice overall. Mayer recognizes that she, as an artist and presumed "insider" in the contemporary art world, does not have all the answers. Instead, through the medium of performance, she empowers the public to form their own interpretations in dialogue with each other, the artists, and the work itself.

This simple phrase tugs at a thread of collaborative, contingent, and accessible discourse that runs through Mayer's career. Cordero Reiman stated the exhibition's title framed *Si tiene dudas... pregunte* as an "invitation for active participation of the public in the exhibition as an opportunity for dialogue and collective construction of knowledge and experience; for questioning ideas about art, gender and society; and for imagining other models in this respect—which is also a lot of what Mónica's, Polvo Gallina Negra's and Pinto mi Raya's work proposes."¹⁴ Centering on doubt released the potential for these works to speak a number of meanings into the world and foregrounded an open investigation that encouraged others to continue to question and made space for uncertainty as a valid platform for the production of collective forms of knowledge.

The secondary aspect of the title, the concept of the "retrocollective," signaled a more direct intervention into traditional curatorial approaches to the retrospective format. This term was coined by Argentinean feminist art historian María Laura Rosa, in conversation with Mayer. Rosa questioned how it was possible for Mayer to have a retrospective because her practices, since the beginning of her career, were so deeply intertwined with and indebted to many different producers.¹⁵ The history of Mayer's life has always been the history of many lives and, indeed, of the women's movement in Mexico. This simple discursive shift to a "retrocollective" allowed space for the exhibition to be a retrospective of Mayer's career that also told a history of the feminist movement in Mexico and its many producers, without whom Mayer's work would not exist. Mayer's approaches to artmaking make applying this concept quite easy, however, the term has broader implications in conceptualizing the histories of artists' lives. A retrocollective might effectively detach an exhibition from the primacy placed on singular artistic genius and allow for a greater consideration of horizontality in historiography, as artists' lives are always collectively built of interwoven actions, influences, and affinities with others.

The layout of the exhibition also supported these interconnected issues of collaborative, contingent, and accessible discourses in ways that sought to disrupt the chronological staging often inherent in retrospective formats. In addition to its official gallery space, the exhibition also made use of the hallway outside its main entrance (fig. 2). Audiences were introduced to Mayer through *El Tendadero* (*The Clothesline*, 1978–ongoing), a project from early in Mayer's career that has followed her throughout. *El Tendadero* marked Mayer's entry onto the public stage of the Mexican art world after its first installation as part of the Museo de Arte Moderno's *Salon 77/78: Nuevas Tendencias* (*Salon 77/78: New Tendencies*) where it was notably praised in the press. The original 1978 version resulted from a month's worth of conversations Mayer had with women on the streets of Mexico City. She asked women to write down what they disliked most about the city onto small pink cards, and many wrote about issues of sexism, harassment, and assault. Mayer hung their responses on a pink clothesline she constructed in the gallery, a symbolic airing out the city's dirty laundry in the institution. During the exhibition, women added more responses to the installation, creating an organic and ongoing dialogue surrounding this often unspoken issue (fig. 3).

Mayer has installed a number of versions of *El Tendedero*, what she calls “reactivations,” around the world in the forty years since this initial version. For each iteration, Mayer puts in preliminary work, holding workshops with community members at each location in order to collaboratively develop the appropriate questions to ask the public. One side of the hallway outside *Si tiene dudas... pregunte* was devoted to the history of *El Tendedero*, while the other featured a reactivation for MUAC. Mayer put together a workshop ahead of the exhibition where community members, many of whom were young women activists interested in stopping gender-based violence, helped to develop the questions for the installation and assisted Mayer in collecting responses from the community (fig. 4).¹⁶ *El Tendedero* was always an object centered in doubt, as Mayer never has an idea of what the outcome will be until the process is undertaken with the community around her. The group developed questions that focused on the issue of sexual assault and added a virtual aspect to the installation so that responses entered online could be printed out and put onto the clothesline throughout the exhibition’s duration.



Fig. 2. Mónica Mayer, Reactivation of *El Tendedero* (*The Clothesline*) in the exhibition *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer*, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2016. Photo courtesy of Mónica Mayer.



Fig. 3. Mónica Mayer, *El Tendedero* (*The Clothesline*) in the exhibition *Salón 77-78. Nuevas tendencias*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Mexico City, 1978. Photo courtesy of Victor Lerma.



Fig. 4. Mónica Mayer and members of the workshop collecting responses for the reactivation of *El Tendedero* (*The Clothesline*), January 9, 2016, Mexico City. Photo courtesy of Yuruen Lerma.



Fig. 5. Mónica Mayer, Detail of reactivation of *El Tendedero* (*The Clothesline*) in the exhibition *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer*, Museo Universitario de Art Contemporáneo, Mexico City, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.

Positioning *El Tendedero* in the hallway was strategic in that it both introduced audiences to the collaborative and open-ended nature of Mayer's work and also allowed the feminist content held within the retrospective to spill out into common areas. Over 5,000 responses were included to the installation, and, a month before the end of the exhibition, two extensions had to be added to the structure to hold them all (fig. 5). The work took up space, conceptually and physically, in the institution. The hallway installation also disturbed the chronological format of a traditional retrospective by collapsing the temporal boundaries often placed on works of art. The juxtapositions of multiple *Tendederos*, old and new, revealed the inherent nature of this work as both past and present. As multiple histories layered on top of one another, they asserted the relevance of the work to today, and its potential for the future.

This disturbance to a traditional chronological format was carried into the interior gallery spaces. The overall layout moved through works from 1970s to the 1990s; however, there were various installations, interventions, and reactivations that brought the present into consideration alongside the past. For example, the original version of Mayer's 1978 conceptual work, *Lo Normal* (*On Normality*), was displayed next to artist María Rodríguez Cruz's 2015 reinterpretation of the work. In her original, Mayer parodied the format of surveys found in women's magazines to pose questions about sexuality, desire, and taboos (fig. 6). Cruz replaced Mayer's face in her version with that of President Enrique Peña Nieto in order to ask questions related to the lack of attention given to issues of femicide and gender-based violence in Mexico. A section devoted to works created by Mayer and Bustamante working as *Polvo de Gallina Negra* dealt with the topic of motherhood; however, a large installation of ephemera related to Mayer's collaborative work *No a las maternidades secuestradas* (*No to kidnapped motherhood*) from 2012 was also included, along with a reactivation of the work made for the exhibition and more specifically addressed issues of motherhood central to working artists and cultural workers (fig. 7).

There were also physical interventions in the gallery space by a number of individuals. Chilean artist and art historian Julia Antivilo led a tour/performance dressed in key texts from the Pinto mi Raya archive (fig. 8). Antivilo guided visitors through the space and invited them to read from selected archival texts at various locations accompanied by music and song.¹⁷ Other tours were given by Mayer's husband, artist Víctor Lerma, and actor Marisol Gassé performing as Madame Pedie Curie. Mayer reflected this aspect of the exhibition, stating, "What I like most about these tours with special



Fig. 6. Mónica Mayer, *Lo Normal (On Normality)*, 1978. Photo courtesy of Mónica Mayer.



Fig. 7. Activation of *Una maternidad secuestrada es...* in the exhibition *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.



Fig. 8. Julia Antivilo performs with documents from Mayer's archive during a tour of the exhibition, 30 June 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.

guests is that they are commentaries on the work of one artist, from that of another. There is symbiosis."¹⁸ The ongoing and prominent inclusion of works and collaborations with other, often younger, artists disrupted the generational divides often asserted by exhibitions of feminist histories, instead suggesting the ongoing relevance of the forms and proposals instigated by Mayer. The space was continuously activated by voices other than Mayer's own, which itself was a demonstration of her practice.

Mayer's body was also integrated into the space through her overwhelming physical presence in the museum. She and Cordero Reiman put together a rich parallel program that ran throughout the six-month duration of the show. The program included the aforementioned guided tours, lectures, and conferences, but also actions and interventions that invited corporeal engagement with Mayer, her work, and the space itself.¹⁹ Mayer personally gave forty tours of the show, which she titled *Si tiene dudas... El Tour (When in Doubt... the Tour)*, a reactivation of her and Lerma's *Performance parásito* that allowed her to converse with a diverse range of visitors (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. A guided tour of *Si tiene dudas... pregunte* with Mónica Mayer and María Laura Rosa, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.



Fig. 10. *El Apapacho estético*, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.



Fig. 11. Knitting circle as part of the activations for *El Jornada final (The Final Day)* of *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer* with the participation of the collective Lana Desastre, July 31, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.



Fig. 12. Activations for *El Jornada final (The Final Day)* of *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer* with the participation of the collective Lana Desastre, July 31, 2016. Photo courtesy of Karen Cordero Reiman.

The parallel program invited collaborations with different collectives that drew tenderness together with activist and artistic issues. *El Apapacho Estético (Aesthetic Caress)* was a performance with Las Brigadas de Belleza Itinerante (Itinerant Beauty Brigades), a collective of stylists and make-up artists who volunteer their time and services to economically and socially vulnerable citizens of Mexico City, led by Diego Sexto.²⁰ The event took over multiple spaces of the museum: art historian Alejandra Gorráez Puga invited open conversation on the issue of precarity in the arts in the courtyard, and Mayer and members of the Brigadas transformed the interior of the museum into a full-scale beauty salon, offering make-overs to those in attendance (fig. 10). Participants took before and after photos where they were encouraged to reflect on their experience with precarity and what could be done to combat it in the art world. Throughout the day, the event also invited a larger dialogue surrounding aesthetics that dissolved disciplinary and class barriers and engaged many of the questions raised in Mayer's work in terms of constructions of femininity, the social role of artists, and the potential for art to create community and healing.

The final action of the parallel program had been scheduled in advance; however, Mayer did not know what she was going to do until the final weeks of the exhibition. She decided to bring the focus to *El Tendedero* to honor the incredible participation of the public in the work. She originally had the idea that she and workshop members would read the responses to the questions asked by *El Tendedero* aloud as a finale to the piece. Mayer tested this out a week before the final day and, after ten minutes of reading responses, was overcome by the violence, and overwhelmed with wanting to comfort those who had written their stories. This caused her to propose the performance, *El Jornada final (The Last Day)*, be centered on actions of healing. She invited the groups Tejiendo Cómplices and Lana Desastre, two activist collectives that use textiles as a means to combat gender-based violence, to stay in the gallery space for the final day of the show (fig. 11).²¹ They invited the public, which included strangers but also key feminist activist and artistic accomplices, to discuss these the issues at the forefront of *El Tendedero*, and thus contemporary society, while collectively weaving small patches that covered the wounds represented in the stories attached to *El Tendedero* (fig. 12). Mayer said of this action of care, “And there we stayed all day. Weaving or learning to weave. Talking. Sharing stories. Reading answers. Interacting with the public. Laughing. Hugging.”²² Mayer’s efforts to detail her experiences on the internet, via *Si tiene dudas... pregunte. El blog*, which she diligently updated with eighty-two texts and photographic documentation spanning 2015–2017, are the main source of documentation for these events. Despite their centrality to the exhibition, they were unable to be included in the catalogue because they did not exist beforehand.

These multifaceted interventions marked the exhibition as a continuously *active* and *activist* space. The juxtapositions made on the walls of the exhibition disturbed any traditional understanding of meaning as static or caged within a particular category in space, time, or medium to instead assert their continued ability to communicate new and different messages to viewers. Mayer and the number of actors who were invited into the space allowed for deeper and durational engagement with the local community in ways that broke down hierarchies often inherent in the museum audience’s experience. This subsequently asserted that Mayer herself was not simply a subject of study, but an active producer of *new* work, even in the midst of the exhibition itself. This was a conscious effort made by Mayer and Cordero Reiman to fight against the potential for the museum to become a “mausoleum,” which did not “happen naturally” but came about “because we are feminists.”²³ Mayer explained further that, “Karen and I conceived of the exhibition as a means, not an end. In other words, it is an action, in terms of Hannah Arendt, whose goal is to kick-start processes. It is a political act.”²⁴ The retrocollective was not a backward look, but instead an example of reimagining works that are emblematic of a feminist life in art as a means to look forward to unforeseen futures. Curator Sol Henaro, who was involved in bringing the exhibition to life at MUAC, asserted the show had an impact on the institution, its staff, researchers, and curators. She considered the exhibition as part of a series of events that brought gendered perspectives into the institution, helping to build trust in MUAC’s place in visibilizing these issues.²⁵

In relation to her proposals for a virtual feminist museum, Pollock argued that “if we approach artworks as propositions, as representations and as texts, that is as sites for the production of meanings and of affects by means of their visual and plastic operations between each other and for viewer/readers, they cease to be mere objects to be classified by aesthetic evaluation or idealized authorship.”²⁶ Pollock’s words here cohere with Cordero Reiman’s approach to curatorial practice, which she explains is related to her “ideas about writing and textuality, conceiving the exhibition as a kind of

multisensorial text in space.”²⁷ Cordero Reiman, drawing from German literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, understands the text as “actualization in the process of reading, in which there are ‘hiatuses’ that allow the readers (or public in this case) to participate on the basis of their own imagination and experiences that they bring to the process (similar to the idea of co-creation by the public in conceptual art).”²⁸ She also links this approach to writing/curating with Cuban anthropologist Ruth Behar, who suggested, “If one writes vulnerably, the readers respond vulnerably; this unsettles authoritarian, hierarchical ideas and habits of discourse, making room for other modes of affective and corporeal expression and involvement.”²⁹ This exhibition provided a situated encounter with Mayer’s life and works understood as cultural practices, rather than historicized objects, and, rather than offering definitive answers, used the works to propose questions and produce new, co-constructed meanings in the present. In doing so, the institution was transformed into a space for durational, embodied, and often vulnerable engagement in ways that fostered community and encouraged collaborative action beyond the institution.

Perhaps it is the very nature of feminist artistic practices, their often collaborative, performative, intimate, and activist qualities, that inherently provide feminist curators with the tools to transform institutions from the inside. The works are already asserting a critical space for intimacy, vulnerability, and doubt into art historical discourses. Feminist theoretical and activist practices supply us with the courage to name our uncertainties, to collaboratively work with and through our doubts, to harness that vulnerability as a central component of feminist praxis. I struggled with my own doubts while writing this article, in the midst of a global pandemic, social and political crises, and the demands of my own institution. When I discussed this with Cordero Reiman, she suggested, drawing from US-American writer and activist Adrienne Maree Brown, to “think of writing for someone you love, rather than for an abstract or hierarchical entity (journal, institution).”³⁰ This reminded me that the act of writing, researching, teaching, and curating from a space of vulnerability and collaborative conversation is itself a feminist action, a working towards building feminist institutions. It reminded me to always, when in doubt... ask.

Notes

- 1** Helen Molesworth, “How to Install Art as a Feminist,” in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 499.
- 2** This article is indebted to my ongoing conversations with art historian and curator Ella S. Mills, PhD: @talking_on_corners.
- 3** Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space, and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007), 9.
- 4** For example, *WACK: Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007), *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum, 2007), *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, 2007), *elles@pompidou* (Centre Pompidou, 2009–10), *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1965–85* (Hammer Museum, 2017–18), and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* (Brooklyn Museum, 2018). For more extensive analyses of these feminist exhibitions from 2005–2011, see Hilary Robinson, “Feminist Meets the Big Exhibition: Museum Survey Shows Since 2005,” *OnCurating* 29 (May 2016): 29–41 and Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2018).
- 5** It should be noted that these shows predominantly centered around the histories of producers situated in the Global North until recent installations, such as *Radical*

Women: Latin American Art, 1965–85, curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill and Connie Butler in 2017–18.

6 Griselda Pollock has argued against the term “feminist art” due to the inherent plurality of feminisms. She explains, “There are a range of feminisms, in varying alliances with all the analyses of what oppresses women... Feminism signifies a set of positions, not an essence; a critical practice, not a doxa; a dynamic and self-critical response and intervention not a platform.” Griselda Pollock, “The Politics of Theory: Generations and Geographies in Feminist Theory and the Histories of Art Histories,” in *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996), 5. She asserted the term “feminist artistic practices” or, drawing from US-American artist Mary Kelly, practice inflected by feminist imperatives, politics, or perspectives, as an alternative to the term “feminist art.” See Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2003) and Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

7 Mónica Mayer, *When in Doubt... Ask: a Retrocollective Exhibition of the Work of Mónica Mayer* (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, 2016); *Suzanne Lacy: We Are Here* (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2019); *Judy Chicago: a Retrospective* (DeYoung Museum, 2021–22).

8 For analysis of retrospective exhibitions of modern artists, see Joanne Heath, “Women Artists, Feminism and the Museum: Beyond the Blockbuster Retrospective,” in *Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference* ed. Alexandra M. Kokoli (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).

9 Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, 10.

10 Her publication, *Rosa Chillante: Mujeres y performance en Mexico*, stands as one of the most comprehensive resources on the history of performance art and feminist practices in Mexico. *Rosa Chillante: Mujeres y Performance en Mexico* (Mexico: CONACULTA, 2004).

11 Karen Cordero Reiman, email message to author, February 19, 2021.

12 Ibid.

13 Mónica Mayer, “PEFORMANCE PARÁSITO,” Si tiene dudas...pregunte. El blog, Pinto mi Raya, January 20, 2016, <http://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra/introduccion/item/25-peformance-parasito>.

14 Karen Cordero Reiman, email message to author, February 19, 2021.

15 For more discussion of this term, see Erin L. McCutcheon, “La lógica feminista de ‘retrocolectividad’: una conversación con Mónica Mayer y Karen Cordero Reiman” *ERRATA* 17 (2018): 174–190.

16 For more information on the overall process, see Mónica Mayer, “EL INDICE DE EL TENDEDERO MUAC,” Si tiene dudas... pregunte. El blog, Pinto mi Raya, November 26, 2016. <https://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/el-tendedero>.

17 She was accompanied by Iber Aracena on accordion. A recording of a portion of the performance can be found here: <https://soundcloud.com/user-528252266/recorrido-con-invitado-especial-julia-antivilo>. Antivilo, Mayer, and Katnira Bello have since published the book, *Intimidades... o no. Arte, vida y femnismo* (Editorial Diecisiete, 2021), centered on these texts.

18 Mónica Mayer, “EL RECORRIDO DE JULIA,” Si tiene dudas...pregunte. El blog, Pinto mi Raya, January 13, 2017, <http://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/si-tiene-dudas/itemlist/tag/Si%20tiene%20dudas>.

19 Lectures were given by art historians Pepe Álvarez Colón, Julianne Gilland, Andrea Giunta, Erin L. McCutcheon, Selene Preciado, and María Laura Rosa.

20 “Apapacho” signifies a particular form of caressing or embracing that is healing and comforting. For more information on Las Brigadas de Belleza Itinerante: <http://brigadasdebellezaitinerante.org/>.

21 For more information on Tejiendo Cómplices, see Twitter: @tejercomplices. For more information on Lana Desastre: <https://www.facebook.com/colectivolanadesastre>.

22 Mónica Mayer, “UNA JORNADA COMPLETA,” Si tiene dudas...pregunte. El blog, Pinto mi Raya, October 24, 2016, <https://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/una-jornada-completa/item/77-una-jornada-completa>.

23 McCutcheon, “La lógica feminista de ‘retrocolectividad,’” 179.

24 Mónica Mayer, “SI TIENE DUDAS... EL TOUR,” Si tiene dudas...pregunte. El blog, Pinto mi Raya, June 16, 2016, <https://pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/si-tiene-dudas/item/64-si-tiene-dudas-el-tour>.

25 Sol Henaro, Facebook message to author, February 19, 2021. Henaro referred to prior events that led up to Mayer’s exhibition, such as *Ojo en rotación: Sarah Minter, imágenes en movimiento 1981-2015* (MUAC, 2015), and pointed to the stated commitment of newly appointed Director of MUAC, Amanda de la Garza, to feminist, gender-related, and activist issues in art.

26 Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, 10.

27 Karen Cordero Reiman, email message to author, February 19, 2021.

28 Ibid.

29 Cordero Reiman citing Ruth Behar’s *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012). Email message to author, February 19, 2021.

30 Karen Cordero Reiman, email message to author, February 19, 2021.

Erin L. McCutcheon is an art historian of postmodern and contemporary art whose research and writing focus on the histories of Latin American art and feminist artistic practices. She received a PhD in art history from Tulane University in 2021 and is currently an Assistant Professor of Art History at Lycoming College. Her research has appeared in *H-ART*, *Nierika*, *Artelogie*, *ERRATA*, *The Journal of Curatorial Studies*, and the catalogue for *Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer* (Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, 2016), for which she served as a curatorial research assistant. Her current book project examines the intersections between art, the women’s movement, and motherhood in post-1968 Mexico City and has been supported by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars.

A Sense of Belonging—Natasha Becker’s Black Feminist Radical Love Curatorial Practice

Sharlene Khan¹



Art on our Mind Creative Dialogue, *Natasha Becker in Dialogue with Sharlene Khan*, 2019, Wits University, Johannesburg. Photograph by: Mosa Kaiser. Courtesy of *Art on our Mind* Research Project.

At the end of 2020, the de Young Museum in San Francisco announced that they had appointed Natasha Becker, a South African, as their inaugural curator of African Art. As reported by online media, it was the first time in their 150-year history that they appointed a Black² curator. This article celebrates her accomplishments in the United States and traces the roots of her critical, black feminist thinking and vision to her unique trajectory in South Africa and across Africa and America.

In 2019, the *Art on our Mind* research team—a visual arts research project based at Wits University in Johannesburg—held a one-and-a-half-hour public creative dialogue with Becker. Excerpts from that conversation form the basis for this article. Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins defines dialogue as the non-dominant humanising speech between two subjects,³ while bell hooks views it as “the sharing of speech and recognition.”⁴ hooks further states that the “awareness of the need to speak, to give voice to the varied dimensions of our lives, is one way women of color begin the process of education for critical consciousness.”⁵ Speech acts between women, between people of colour, are not just loaded with information about the personal, but also histories, knowledges, and society, and, as hooks poignantly notes, in the act of recognition, subjects and subjectivities are grafted. Thus, dialogue is an important black feminist methodology, and my dialogue with Becker reveals both personal information about her trajectory and the ways in which she navigated larger sets of South African and US cultural politics.

Becker was born in 1974 in apartheid South Africa (SA) and attended segregated schools, not having much exposure to art at either primary or high school. Her parents and schoolteachers, however, encouraged her voracious intellectual curiosity, and this continued when she went to study at the University of the Western-Cape (UWC), a historically black university campus known for its political consciousness during apartheid. Becker was fortunate to have activist teachers and university professors who helped her to channel her intellectual energies and hone her critical thinking. If evidence of this is needed, one only has to read a review published by Becker in 2001 in the scholarly journal *Kronos* of the photographic exhibition *Lives of Colour* (1999) when she was a twenty-year-old Philosophy Honours student. In it, Becker's nuanced, ambiguous readings of the role of photographic representations in Coloured lives under apartheid and how these personal narratives come to contest "officially" instituted ones demonstrated the type of disruptive thinking that is a hallmark of her career.⁶ Becker completed a Bachelor of Arts in History, Philosophy, and English. She also holds a Diploma in Education from the University of Cape Town and a Master's Degree in African History at the University of the Western Cape.

During her graduate studies with historian Patricia Hayes, Becker became intrigued by photographic archives. Together they developed and taught a course called "Visual History" that problematised photographic representation in writing about the past. With Hayes' encouragement, Becker embarked on a PhD in Art History at Binghamton University in New York, where she was part of an international cohort of graduate students in Visual Arts and Curatorial Studies. Her fellow students' curiosity about South African art prompted Becker to turn her attention to the history of art in South Africa and to an independent scholarly study of it from the early 1930s onwards. This was supplemented by her visits to contemporary art exhibitions in New York in the early 2000s. One of the highlights of her graduate student days was hearing Thelma Golden speak about the significance of culturally-specific institutions such as the Studio Museum in Harlem at a graduate student conference. She found the US an amazing place to study African Art, as the university and the city offered extensive access to archives, libraries, museum collections, art galleries, exhibitions, and a network of artists, scholars, and curators.

During this time, Becker was offered an opportunity to curate an exhibition by Juan Puentes at Whitebox Gallery in Chelsea. He had an enthusiasm for socio-political art and exhibited contemporary South African artists. It was her first foray into curating, but she embraced the challenge and plunged into the process. She good-naturedly describes the show as a "disaster" because she had a small budget and three ambitious artists but also notes that she learned valuable lessons about the practical aspects of curating through these early mistakes. Even as she wondered whether she was cut out to be a curator, on the creative front the gallery became a space for artistic and curatorial experimentation. At the end of her coursework, Becker moved to New York City and taught courses on photography in Africa at the New School and the School of Visual Arts, while continuing her research on South Africa's Johannesburg Biennales.

In 2007, she accepted a position at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown as the Assistant Director for their Research and Academic Program (RAP) until 2013. The Clark is recognised as a dual-mission institution with both an art museum and a distinguished centre for research and higher education. She was responsible for implementing a three-year Mellon Foundation-funded research project on contemporary African art. She describes her time at the Clark as an exciting

opportunity to draw on her South African background and her studies in contemporary art, while the renowned network provided more learning opportunities.⁷

In 2009, another curatorial opportunity arose from Becker’s relationship with conceptual artist Bradley McCallum, whom she had met in New York City two years earlier. The artist now owned a historic building in the small town of Greenfield, Massachusetts (just forty-five minutes away from Williamstown). During a visit, Becker became intrigued by the abundance of empty storefronts and unused historic buildings and the absence of art venues and programmes, and pondering on the situation, Becker and McCallum came up with the idea of a weekend festival to celebrate art and the historical architecture. McCallum took the role of festival organiser and Becker that of curator. Video was decided on due to the variety of forms that the medium could take and that could feasibly be hosted within the town’s unconventional spaces. They drew on their networks to invite local and international artists. McCallum secured the support of the town mayor, building owners, and the Greenfield Chamber of Commerce. Students and residents of the town assisted and volunteered their time by managing spaces, leading tours, and monitoring different sites. Two months later, the *Brick+Mortar International Video Art Festival* opened, engaging with issues that were of concern to residents at the time. These included drug abuse, lack of public space, the war in Iraq, and various identity politics. The festival had all the usual challenges (of fundraising, tech problems, communications, staffing, etc.), but it drew thousands of visitors over a three-day weekend in October 2009. Its success led to three more editions organised by McCallum and Becker with guest curators Loretta Yarlow, Christopher Cox, and Denise Markonish between 2010-2012. The festival was a formative moment in Becker’s decision to pursue curating. The experience made her aware of a few things: she enjoyed connecting to people she didn’t know; she was open to experimentation, new audiences, and spaces; she valued an authentic relationship with artists and communities; and it revealed the political nature of her intellectual curiosity and curatorial aspirations.



Natasha Becker and Jaishri Abichandani, *Perilous Bodies*, 5 March – 11 May 2019, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York. Photograph by: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of Natasha Becker.



Natasha Becker and Jaishri Abichandani, *Perilous Bodies*, 5 March – 11 May 2019, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York. Photograph by: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of Natasha Becker.

While the US and South Africa may seem to share some similar class, gender, and racial struggles, this text argues that Becker’s upbringing and having to overcome the challenges racism (and the intersecting matrices of identity issues) posed for black South Africans prepared her to a large extent for dealing with US conditions. Living in the US for almost twenty years has allowed her to experience that country’s unique socio-political, historical, cultural, and artistic formations. In working between the two, however, I suggest that Becker has displayed an extraordinary capacity for empathy and developed a transcultural, feminist approach to speak to globalised audiences. I will highlight three of her curatorial ventures that particularly embody this: the Ford Foundation Gallery’s exhibition *Radical Love*; the setting up of the Assembly Room Gallery; and the *Underline Show*.

In 2019, Becker co-curated a series of exhibitions for the Ford Foundation Gallery in New York with Jaishri Abichandani.⁸ The first of these, *Perilous Bodies*, was centred around the theme of violence (systemic, inequalities, Otherness, gender-based, political, historical, environmental). The opening night was attended by 1,000 people. Becker says it was overwhelming to see lines of people around the block waiting to get into the exhibition who were not the usual New York gallery crowd. She recalls, “You would think in a city like New York City with so many museums, galleries, so much to offer that people would actually feel welcomed in, like places were for them, but a lot of people don’t, a lot of people of colour still don’t feel places are for them, and it is still very segregated.”⁹ Becker’s statements may seem surprising. We understand that there is not such blatant racism as to prevent anyone from entering institutions; however, as many scholars of colour have discussed, systemic racism is written into the very codification of various arts fields.¹⁰

In 2019, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts was accused of haranguing and mistreating a group of black middle school students who were reportedly told by a staff member, “No food, no drink and no watermelon.”¹¹ Moreover, the issue of whether *one feels*

welcome in a space is an entirely different matter. Even as a visual arts professor with two Master’s degrees and a PhD in the field, I constantly feel frowned upon, surveilled and policed in art institutions by administrative and security staff even without encountering statements as blatant as those recalled above. Sara Ahmed¹² and Grada Kilomba¹³ discuss how the white body is free to move about, that in the *unmarking of whiteness*, it is always in place, while it is bodies of colour that are marked and are treated as being in need of policing and constant surveillance. Becker’s statements testify to the socio-political reality that particular groups continue to find the visual arts/art history fields and their attending institutions alienating, in their continued servicing of their colonial-modernist foundations. This was highlighted in the #RhodesMustFall¹⁴ and #Shackville Protests¹⁵ in South Africa, which sparked international questions about the prevalence of hegemonic colonial formations in African discourses; the #MeToo Movement¹⁶ and #BlackLivesMatter movement, where not only the continued relevance of colonial cultural productions across the world were raised, but also tone-deaf and toxic working conditions of white museums and gallery spaces, which led to the firing or resignation of quite a few persons over the last few years.¹⁷

These movements are often seen as representing the “marginalised”, as the “oppressed” asking to be included, to be welcomed into institutions, to see themselves represented in discourses. When one starts to examine these groups—women of colour, people of colour, postcolonial subjects, women, transgender, etc.—one sees this is more than half of the world’s population, the majority, and, therefore, far from not belonging and being accommodated, they— we— belong in every historical encounter and every institutional record *all of the time*. I want to quote an exchange between Becker and an audience member at length here that demonstrates this kind of radical thinking:

Audience: [...] I was thinking of activism, as you’re talking about opening up creative space and the way in which certain people feel as if they don’t belong and the internalised borders that get created by so-called culture—high culture versus popular culture.

Becker: Well, right, it’s not just internalised, we don’t just internalise where we belong and where we [are] made to feel like we belong and where [are] we made to feel like we don’t belong, but it is also external, it is a real thing, it’s not something that we kind of just imagine. [...] My experience of being on the outside had to do with being on the outside of society in general, and growing up as a “Coloured” in a southern suburb of Cape Town, you really are in this place of alterity because your heritage for 400 years is African, Asian and European, but you can’t even trace your second generation. That’s how deeply mixed you are and how deeply violent that has been right? So, I think that you come out of wherever you come out of and you see how things work in the real world, but then you have to make the choice, and for me it was this choice of, well, I am a part of this by virtue of the fact that I love art, that scholarship is a passion, art is a passion and working with art is, but by virtue of that alone, that is all I need. Speaking of the title of the conference, this quote was very gripping for me—to act from the epicentre of yourself, of where you come from means that you have to always overcome that and *see yourself as already belonging there, already there*. You know, *we were always already there* right and what would you do? So you are there, so what would you do if you didn’t have to think, have to justify, explain, fight, argue, defend, what would you do? And then just do that. But you know it takes time, it’s an arc, everybody’s on their own journey.¹⁸

There is so much wisdom in this exchange. Becker is not denying the exceptional history of generational violence that her family, ancestors, and she, herself, have been subjected to by the fact of not being able to trace her family genealogy with certitude, by not knowing her indigenous tongues. Yet, it is not by this violence that she defines herself. She has chosen for her Self a different epicentre. The African Feminisms conference theme to which she refers was based on Nigerian Stiwanist theorist Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie’s stance that Africans need to theorise out of our “epicentres of agency, looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans.”¹⁹ For Becker, this certitude is that people of colour have been ever-present in spaces, geographies, and histories, with their own creativities globally. We see this demonstrated in her curatorial practice in the following ways. As mentioned earlier, she never studied art at school or during her BA, but she grew up surrounded by creativity: her father was an aspiring musician, her mother an avid reader, her grandmother a great cook and knitter, in a home surrounded by an incredible garden.²⁰ These creative sensibilities make their appearance repeatedly in Becker’s practice. As a Black South African, Becker keenly understands the inter-relatedness between herself (the I) and community (we) through the concept of ubuntu—“I am because we are.”²¹ The proximation of one is constant to the constituting, the state, and the consistent welfare of the other. In dialogue, Becker speaks often of creating and being “part of a community,” whether that is the New York art habitus or a more general arts field, but also of being *in community with* other women curators regardless of space or time. This was part of the impetus that spurred on her other developments: the Assembly Room Gallery, which she established with Yulia Topchiy and Paola Gallio on the Lower East Side in New York in 2018, and *The Underline Show*, which she co-curated in Johannesburg in 2018. The other part of that impulse is pragmatic—working together and pooling resources to create professional opportunities.

Becker says the 300-square-foot Assembly Room²² came about after more than a year of informal gatherings between women curators meeting to support each other, offering a space for women to curate their exhibitions (even as the three curators also feature their own shows). The platform is funded by Becker, Topchiy, and Gallio. All artworks are available for sale, but unlike a traditional gallery model in which profits are split between the artist and the gallery, Assembly Room shares their commissions on sales with guest curators. In the past two years, they have hosted numerous public programmes, exhibitions, and professional enrichment workshops that included local and community collaborations. The platform has become a model of community and shared opportunity within New York City’s ambitious art world.

In 2009, Becker brought this experience to South Africa when she founded *The Underline Show*²³ with Londi Modiko and Lara Koseff. Inspired by the *New York Spring/Break Art Fair* format in which Becker has regularly participated since 2015, their goal was to provide much needed relief to the Johannesburg art scene, which has become stifled by the “institution” of the traditional art fair model. *The Underline Show* provided space to a number of emerging and young curators and artists to propose exhibitions and present their work to the public during the same weekend as the more established Johannesburg Art Fair. For the first time in South Africa, one could approach an art fair as an individual curator, collective, or artist. It was refreshing to witness a range of straight-out-of-university, cutting-edge, diverse, performative, and installation-based artworks, including community-based organisations. There was a core-curated section, a featured section focusing on individual artists, a site section for ambitious installations responding to the architecture, a performance programme, and a public conversation series. Some artworks were for sale, others not. *Underline* generated



Natasha Becker and Jaishri Abichandani, *Radical Love*, 11 June – 17 August 2019, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York. Photograph by: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of Ford Foundation Gallery.

excitement for experimental work and opportunities for emerging curators and artists. This may not sound particularly remarkable to outside ears, but it is for the SA art market, which almost always showcases artworks and artists that are well-established, even “safe.” If there was a marker of Becker’s methodologies, I would argue it was that for the first time in a long time, more people felt included than excluded (from the many young curators and artists participating to the audience who attended).

Becker makes no qualms about her curatorial interest in feminism and believes that there is no end to the redress that needs to be done to historical imbalances, although she doesn’t see this as ensuring any less rigorous and pleasurable fare for audiences. In her exhibition *Radical Love*, audiences were treated to a visual feast as an “antidote” to the violence of the preceding *Perilous Bodies* exhibition. Based on bell hooks’ idea that transformation can only transpire through revolutionary love, it aimed to also recuperate the word from its post-9/11 association with religious fundamentalism, and to talk about love as a radical act that transforms. The high white walls of the Ford Foundation Gallery were painted in a beautiful blood-red colour. The crimson walls can be read as a trace of the violence that seeped through from *Perilous Bodies*, but it is on this blood-red terrain that others more glorious have emerged in *Radical Love*. The deep colour could also be read as blood lines which mark out our common ancestry under our skins, or (menstrual) blood that ushers us into womanhood, birth, or old age. Sometimes, it is the cutting open of wounds that have to be cleaned up or sutured in order for healing to occur. It is also the feeling of a heart that is open and pulsating with blood when one is scared, faced with adventure or love. The group of largely international artists²⁴ presented artwork that resided between spaces, identities, histories, and languages, and these intersectionalities were seen in the vibrancy of their works that, at times, bordered on excessive. At the very least, the exhibition refuses sterility, including that of the white cube space, but the immoderation reminds one of traditional art and ethnic textiles in which colours and forms sit next to each

other without attempting dominance. The works move trans-continentially, as with many of Becker’s shows, and for someone who cannot trace her own genealogies, as a historian she connects us all through the visual and world cultures on display.

In this she reminds me of my mother. My elder sisters share a different father from my brother and I, but not once was the word “step-“ ever used. They were my sisters. I only got to know of the word “step-“ as a white person’s word that I encountered on TV and in books. My mum was afraid that when she died, when she was no longer our centre, we might be fractured. Since she passed, however, we have all been even closer, because we are now held together not by blood, but by choice and her love—a radical feminist love, that knew not the word “feminism,” but how to grow kinship that is not determined by sperm and an inherited patriarchal name. I see Becker as similarly reminding audiences of their common human kinship and that we can be determined by our radical love choices. This was a powerful message during the challenging US Trump administration and will continue to be for a long time to come.

Besides paying homage to hooks, whose thinking and theorising were inspiration for Becker and Abichandani, *Radical Love* also “wanted to express just the joy and the excess and the beauty and the richness of our lives, the richness of the lives of people of color, the lives of queer people, the lives of brown people, indigenous people as well in the US. So, the show, as you can see, it’s just very opulent, and very rich, it’s a visual feast [...].”²⁵ A politics of joy, excess, of beauty and richness is central to black-African feminists, for we are not defined solely by our suffering. While Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie says that the African woman labours with six mountains on her back,²⁶ we are reminded by South African feminist Pumla Gqola²⁷ that because it is on her back, she is still able to move forward. So, while it is tempting to focus on the travails of the oppressed, Becker chooses to highlight the multiverse and multidimensionality of black lives.



Natasha Becker and Jaishri Abichandani, *Radical Love*, 11 June – 17 August 2019, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York. Photograph by: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of Ford Foundation Gallery.



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Natasha Becker and Jaishri Abichandani, *Radical Love*, 11 June – 17 August 2019, Ford Foundation Gallery, New York. Photograph by: Sebastian Bach. Courtesy of Ford Foundation Gallery.

As a black feminist, Becker uses her lived experiences as crucial matter to draw on as research areas, as motifs, methodologies, and materialities. In her feminist curating, she speaks of her curatorial practice as her own creative aesthetic practice and engagement with artists as collaborative; she has to be in the space to hear it speaking to her (she discusses “space as a key ingredient,” of using one’s senses);²⁸ she mentions presenting a visual feast; her exhibitions feel like a rich quilt—all of these go back to the everyday creativities she grew up with, and an understanding that although we did not grow up with “fine arts”—as hooks,²⁹ Collins,³⁰ and Walter Mignolo have demonstrated—our home spaces and interior lives have been filled with creativity.³¹ In harnessing such language as a creative feminist curator of colour, Becker is able to use her intersectional positionality to connect with various communities to allow them the sense that they belong. She is keenly aware of the difficulty of working in North American or European institutions and knowing that even though you may curate successful exhibitions, these spaces may still remain violent, and that one has to continually work with the limitations of an institution that “does diversity work” as part of its programming. However, having grown up under those same structures in apartheid South Africa, she has learnt to recognise and seize the smallest opportunities to make a difference. In her essay for *Radical Love*, she says, “The enveloping red walls of the gallery allow us to literally and metaphorically recalibrate the space and create a positively exhilarating center for otherness and action.”³² To be woman is to be faced by a discourse of othering—not an othering itself. Knowing that distinction is key. That is the radical epicentre from which Becker works, and in doing so, she joins the ranks of those like Angela Davis whose famous quote she uses in that same essay: “You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.”³³

Notes

1 The author wishes to thank Kiani Ned at the Ford Foundation Gallery for assistance with the images for this text, Natasha Becker for her invaluable input and patience, as well as the *Art on our Mind* research team. This research has been made possible through a joint grant from the National Research Foundation Thuthuka Grant and Wits University, and funding from the Arts Research Africa for the African Feminisms (Afems) 2019 Conference.

2 This research utilises official South African racial categories as established under apartheid and their continued usage post-apartheid: “White” (persons of white European descent), “Black” (local indigenous Black Africans), “Coloured” (persons of mixed race and descendants of Malaya/Indian/Mozambican slaves and prisoners), “Indian” (persons of South Asian descent that arrived as slaves in Cape Town in the 17th century and, in the second half of the 19th century, first as British Indentured labourers and then as merchants). Where the terms “black” (lower case “b”) or “people of colour” are used, they are used in preference of “non-white” and include Black, Coloured, and Indian South Africans also grouped under the term “previously disadvantaged,” which in the latter half of the 1990s also constitutionally includes Chinese South Africans. These terms are also used to denote identification with blackness as a politically self-affirmative project and stance (e.g., “black feminism”).

3 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990/2009), 279.

4 bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 6.

5 *Ibid.*, 13.

6 Natasha Becker, "The 'Lives of Colour' Exhibition. South African National Gallery, September 1999," *Kronos* 27 (2001): 270-291.

7 The list of artists, scholars, curators, and artists she met there and engaged with is exhaustive and include Lisa Corrin (director of Williams College Museum), Julie Mehretu (artist), Chika Okeke-Agulu (visiting scholar), Maria Magdalena Compos Pons (artist), Hank Willis Thomas (artist), Darby English (scholar), Okwui Enwezor (curator), Christa Clarke (curator), Bisi Silva (curator), Michael Ann Holly (director of RAP), Willie Cole (artist), Kobena Mercer (scholar), among many others.

8 The exhibitions were *Perilous Bodies* (4 March-11 May 2019) and *Radical Love* (11 June-17 August 2019) co-curated by Jaishri Abichandani and Becker), while the final exhibition *Utopian Imagination* (17 September-7 December 2019) was curated solely by Abichandani.

9 Natasha Becker, "Art on our Mind Creative Dialogue with Natasha Becker," Interview by Sharlene Khan, *Art on our Mind*, 5 September 2019, video, 01:38:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wITsTOZRk1k&t=5054s>.

10 In his text "Why the Arts Don't Do Anything: Towards a New Vision for Cultural Production in Education," Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández not only speaks of "arts" in a deeply pluralistic sense, encompassing many forms that are not traditionally taught, but also speaks to many of the governing elitist mechanisms that control the educational paradigms of the traditional "arts" fields and how they rely on such to keep the habitus small. See the works of the following scholars who have written on racism and aesthetics/racism in the arts field: Carolina A. Miranda, "Are Museums Still Racist? The COVID Reset," *Los Angeles Times*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-10-22/art-museums-racism-covid-reset>; bell hooks, *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press 1995); Rubén A. Gaztambide-Fernández, "Decolonial Options and Artistic/AestheSic Entanglements: An Interview with Walter Mignolo," *Decolonisation: Indigeneity, Education and Society* 3, no. 1 (2014): 196-211; Khwezi Gule, "Doing Ventriloquism," in *Aluta Continua: Doing it for Daddy... Ten Years On*, ed. Sharlene Khan (Johannesburg: Pole Pole Press, 2020), 34-39; Sharlene Khan, "Aluta Continua: Doing it for Daddy," *Art South Africa* 4, no. 3 (2006): 56; Sharlene Khan, "But What's All Dis Here Talkin 'Bout?," *Artthrob*, 2011, <http://www.artthrob.co.za/Reviews/But-Whats-All-Dis-Here-Talking-About.aspx>; Sharlene Khan and Fouad Asfour, "Whitespeak: How Race Works in South African Art Criticism Texts to Maintain the Arts as the Property of Whiteness," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*, eds. Amelia M. Kraehe, Ruben Gaztambide-Fernández, and Stephen B. Carpenter II (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan/Springer International, 2018), 107-204.

11 William J. Kole, "Art Museum Accused of Racism Names First Director of Inclusion," *PBSO News Hours*, 3 September 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/art-museum-accused-of-racism-names-first-director-of-inclusion>.

12 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

13 Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* (Münster: UNRAST-Verlag, 2008).

14 The #RhodesMustFall student protests occurred at the University in Cape Town (UCT) in 2015 demanding the removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue but also extending to discussions of UCT as an oppressive educational space, the decolonisation of university curricula, the role of "fine arts" and visual culture in hegemonies as well, and to the role of public culture and memorialisation in South Africa more generally.

15 In 2016, students at UCT erected a shack (an informal housing structure) as a symbol of both their struggles with accommodation and university costs in UCT and Cape Town, as well as the gross inequalities faced by Black students attempting to

access education at a former White institution. The structure was violently demolished on 15 February 2016 by private security, angering student protestors who went into nearby accommodation halls and pulled several artworks off the walls and set them alight on a bonfire. These incidents highlighted the tensions over the cultural symbolic values, as portraits of former white administrators, that nobody remembers anymore, were prized as more important than the struggle for human dignity for affordable housing and education, and as the protestors were called barbarians and their act analogized to Nazi-era book burnings. For an alternate reading which demonstrates how white violence is not only downplayed but aligned with white liberal arts values while black bodies are constantly made agonistic, see art historian Nomusa Makhubu's "Show Me the Flaming Art," in *Aluta Continua: Doing it for Daddy...Ten Years On*, ed. Sharlene Khan (Johannesburg: Pole Pole Press, 2020), 8-12.

16 See, for instance, the Halperin and Burns's *ArtNet* report that shows that women remain utterly under-represented in all aspects in the visual arts terrain. Julia Halperin and Charlotte Burns, "Female Artists Represent Just 2 Percent of the Market. Here's Why – and How That Can Change," *Artnet News*, 19 September 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/womens-place-in-the-art-world/female-artists-represent-just-2-percent-market-heres-can-change-1654954>.

17 These include: SFMOMA's Nat Keeton and Gary Garrels; Montreal Museum of Fine Art's Nathalie Bondil; Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit's Elysia Borowy-Reeder; New Mexico History Museum's Andrew Wulf; Erie Art Museum's Joshua Helmer; Canter Arts Centre's Susan Dackerman; and Akron Art Museum's Mark Masuka.

18 Becker, interview.

19 In Desiree Lewis, "Desiree Lewis talks to Molaria Ogundipe, leading feminist theorist, poet, literary critic, educator and activist, about the interface of politics, culture and education," *Feminist Africa*, no. 1 (2002): 6.

20 Becker, interview.

21 For more on this possibility of using proximity and ubuntu as a radical decolonising curatorial practice, see Sharlene Khan, "We-All-Fall-Down: Thinking Through Lines of Proximity and Ubuntu as Decolonizing Praxis in South African Museum Re-Presentations," in *What Do Museums Change? Art and Democracy*, ed. Sunhee Jang (Seoul: National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, 2020), 222-243.

22 <http://assemblyroom.nyc/>.

23 <https://underlineprojects.art/>.

24 Artists in the exhibition included: Sue Austin (UK); La Vaughn Belle (Virgin Islands) & Jeannette Ehlers (Denmark); Maria Berrio (Columbia/US); Raúl de Nieves (Mexico/US); Omar Victor Diop (Senegal); Vanessa German (US); Jah Grey (US); Baseera Khan (US); Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt (US); McCallum & Tarry (US); Bradley McCallum & Jacqueline Tarry; Rashaad Newsome (US); Ebony G. Patterson (Jamaica/US); Jody Paulsen (South Africa); Thania Petersen (South Africa); Lina Puerta (US); Faith Ringgold (US); Athi-Patra Ruga (South Africa); Nep Sidhu (India/Canada); Rose B. Simpson (US); Imani Uzuri (US); and Lina Iris Viktor (Liberia/UK).

25 Becker, interview.

26 In her book *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, Ogundipe-Leslie adapts Mao-Tse Tung's metaphor of the Chinese man having three mountains on his back (colonial oppression from outside, feudal oppression from authoritarianism, his own backwardness), while the Chinese woman had a fourth (oppression from men). Ogundipe-Leslie clarifies the six mountains on an African woman's back as: outside oppression (colonialism and neocolonialism); traditional structures (feudalism, slave-based, communal); backwardness; man; her colour (race); and herself. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994), 28.

27 Pumla Dineo Gqola. “Ufanele Uqavile: Blackwomen, Feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 16, no. 50 (2001): 12.

28 Becker, interview.

29 hooks, *Art on My Mind*.

30 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*.

31 Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, “Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings,” *Social Text Online* (2013); Gaztambide-Fernández, “Decolonial Options.”

32 Natasha Becker, “An Ode to Love,” Ford Foundation Gallery Website, 2019, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/about/the-ford-foundation-center-for-social-justice/ford-foundation-gallery/exhibitions/radical-love/an-ode-to-love/>.

33 Ibid.

Sharlene Khan is a South African visual artist who works in multi-media installations and performances, which focus on the socio-political realities of a post-apartheid society and the intersectionality of race-gender-class. She uses masquerading as a postcolonial strategy to interrogate her South African heritage, as well as the constructedness of identity via rote education, art discourses, historical narratives, and popular culture. She has exhibited in the UK, Italy, France, Germany, South Africa, India, South Korea, and Greece and has participated in various international conferences. Her writings on contemporary visual arts appear in journals, books, art catalogues, and magazines including *Art South Africa*, *Artthrob*, *Springerin*, *Manifesta*, *Contemporary-And*, *The Conversation Africa*, *Imbizo: International Journal of African Literary and African Studies*, *Agenda* and *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*. She has been a recipient of the Abe Bailey Travel Bursary (1998), the Rockefeller Bellagio Arts residency (2009), the Canon Collins/Commonwealth Scholarship (2011), the African Humanities Postdoctoral Fellowship (2017), the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences Award for Visual Arts (2018), and was runner-up in the Videokunst Preis Bremen Art Award (2015). She has been nominated twice for the South African Women in the Arts Award (Painting) and has received funding from the National Arts Council multiple times. She has published three books on her work: *What I look like*, *What I feel like* (2009); *I Make Art* (2017); and *When the moon waxes red... Negotiating Subjective Terrain as an ‘Inside-Outsider’, an ‘Outside-Insider’* (2019). She is co-convenor of the annual African Feminisms (Afems) Conference; runs the *Art on our Mind* Research Project, the Black Feminist Killjoy Reading Group, and the Decolonial AestheSis Creative Lab. She holds a PhD (Arts) from Goldsmiths, University of London and is currently Associate Professor at the Department of Fine Arts, Wits University, Johannesburg.

Women Themed Exhibitions: Aaargh! “Aaargh!” The Two Talking Yonis

South African writer Mary Corrigan once wrote a text bemoaning the over-saturation of group exhibitions of women artists. Titling her article “Women Themed exhibitions: Aaargh!,” Corrigan questioned the continued production of exhibitions of this nature and the burden they placed on women’s art to change the status quo in South Africa. This fatigue over women-themed exhibitions reflects real concerns about the lack of impact that such undertakings have on many women artists’ careers. Equally, the project of reform and redress remains necessary within an art industry that still produces uneven valuing systems and inconsistent recognition of women artists, particularly Black women artists.

As Linda Nochlin, the celebrated American feminist curator and art historian, observed many years ago in her article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”¹ that the problem with this kind of historical imbalance cannot be solved through a simple implementation of showing “mass visibility.” Instead, it should be interrogated by asking “why” particular kinds of acknowledgements extend to male artists, but not women artists. While Nochlin was writing about the state of the arts in the West, we relate this sentiment to South Africa. Certainly, there is now an increased visibility of women, but this does not always mean their careers are flourishing. In fact, as we know, the revolving door of visibility (of the art market) always ensures that only a few are seen at a time, which further illustrates that exhibitory inclusions are not enough. So, while it might appear that women-only exhibitions overreach, as Corrigan contests, given that so many South African women artists are known today, they nonetheless remain pertinent given the disproportionate recognition of male versus women artists, in particular the lesser value attached to the work of Black women. As Theminkosi Goniwe² often laments, “Until real redress has happened in the art world, we will keep calling for a specific emphasis on all that has been excluded in the past, albeit gender, race, sexuality, and so forth. We will keep reinforcing the need to engage these particular exclusions until there is real change.”

While Goniwe’s lamentations suggest that the objectives of the “group show” remain relevant, specifically those of race and gender redress, he also acknowledges their failure, pointing to the need to rethink the age-old formula of the group show. In this essay, we consider the problematics and possibilities of producing group shows in South Africa today, looking at the exhibition *Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South* (2020–2021), curated by Clive Kellner. We see this exhibition as a proposition upon which to engage broader concerns around exhibition-making practices beyond the simple group show “promotion” trope. These concerns have to do with: Who curates? Where do these exhibitions happen? How are these shows framed? Who do they frame? With what means are they made? And, who are they for?

By asking these questions, we hope to show how complicated gendered and racially focused exhibitions have become. We hope to demonstrate how words like “woman” and “female” have come to mean more than interchangeable descriptors of gender, and instead call for deeper and conscientious use in challenging dominant misconcep-

tions. As it is well-known, exhibitions also speak differently to broader social, cultural, class, and political critiques. To this end, this essay calls for much consideration of what it means today to make gender- and race-focused shows. It is a call to recognise that racialised and gendered group shows, in the current moment, need different interventions if they continue to bring together the work of Black women artists.

Such a critical engagement with gendered and racialised exhibitions is needed, as we believe that if such exhibitions are produced uncritically, they can sometimes show a failure to recognise violence—violence that artists themselves often call out in their work, in direct or codified ways, and the violence that the curatorial framework can sometimes inadvertently demonstrate. Violence in curatorial frameworks is reflected in the ways in which Black women artists’ work is presented through hackneyed terms like “identity.” Continuously included in groups, as othered, exoticised, and made to look different, and the insistence for that difference to always be on display, in the end, make the exhibition the arbiter of what might be problematic racialised and gendered visibility. Thinking about this, we are reminded of the argument of feminist theorist and literary scholar, Gabeba Baderoon, that “What we choose to display in our public spaces, who curates our perspectives, who becomes visible to us in art—represents a national conversation about who ‘we’ are.”³ Turning to *Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South*, we ask, which national⁴ conversation is the curator of this show representing here? By unpacking this women-themed exhibition, not only through the artworks, but also through the curatorial framework, its context, and exhibition praxis, we interrogate the role of the curator and the place of such a group show, to imagine a different future for Black women artists’ public visibility.

In thinking this way, we are encouraged by feminist theorist and literary scholar Pumla Gqola to consider “linguaging”⁵ in her explanation of the power of meaning that comes through the form, structure, and aesthetic of a literary text. Relating the concept of linguaging to exhibitions, we recognise that by focussing on the content of artworks alone we lose sight of the exhibitionary affect that is translated through form, structure, and aesthetic: the very linguaging of the exhibition’s meaning-making, and its subsequent impact on Black women artists.

Linguaging could be linked more directly to discourses of curatorial practice. Curator Kellner has himself articulated what he calls “the grammar of the exhibition”⁶ when he says, as a curator, “My proposition [is] to enhance the performative aspects of exhibition-making where the choreography of the exhibition is something that is staged and performed for an audience.”⁷ He further describes an exhibition’s grammar as “the idea of exhibition-as-landscape where the visual and architectural elements bec[o]me one.”⁸

In the following sections, we engage the ideas of linguaging and the grammar of exhibitions in arguing for a different encounter of Black women artists’ works.

Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South (2020-2021)

The miracle is, in fact, that, given the overwhelming odds against women, or blacks, so many of both have managed to achieve so much sheer excellence, in the face of violent, selective and shifting definitions of history and art, and in the face of direct suppression, omission, gatekeeping, lack of transparency, and outright unprincipled opportunism of unscrupulous gallerists, and their ilk.⁹
– Nkule Mabaso

For their inaugural exhibition in 2020, the Johannesburg Contemporary Art Foundation (JCAF) featured the work of five women artists from the Global South. Titled *Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South* the exhibition included works by Bharti Kher (India, UK), Wangechi Mutu (Kenya, USA), Nandipha Mntambo (South Africa), Shirin Neshat (Iran, USA), and Berni Searle (South Africa). For the JCAF's official launch on the 27th of February 2020, rather than hosting a grand opening party, the foundation instead opened with a lecture titled *The Planet, the Universe and the Museum: Territories of the Imperial Imagination* by Arjun Appadurai, a Goddard Professor in Media, Culture, and Communications at New York University. The exhibition was installed later and was open to view by appointment from 16 September 2020 to 30 January 2021. According to the director of the foundation and curator of the opening show, Clive Kellner, by launching the space with a lecture and through "someone representing a dialogue with the 'global south' (as per the terms of the invitation)" the intention was "to shift the focus of the opening to 'ideas.'"¹⁰ By doing this, the foundation sets itself apart from how museums and galleries conventionally stage exhibitions, in line with their objective and claim to be "a hybrid institution, combining an academic research institute, an innovative technology laboratory and a platform for museum-quality exhibitions."¹¹

Though the exhibition was opened for public viewing on 16 September 2020, following a mandate of "private tours" as is the foundation's viewing policy, we were only able to see it in January 2021. This period of waiting demonstrated to us the exclusionary nature of the foundation which, contrary to its meticulous focus on research and innovation, unfortunately meant it was only accessible to a few and thus did not fulfil the institution's claim to "educat[e] diverse audiences."¹² We never intended to engage the exhibition textually. However, upon seeing the show, it became apparent to us that South African curatorial practice has reached a place where we can have complicated conversations about the function and purpose of exhibitions beyond "promotional" speak. There is room now to think more deeply about the political and ideological function of these events in the public domain. For this reason, we then decided to critically engage with this exhibition, excited by the possibilities of this institution's offering of a space dedicated to critical thinking around the workings of the exhibition form, its conceptual gesture and thesis, and the role of research in art's encounter.

As we viewed the exhibition, questions around Gqola's proposition on "linguaging" came to mind, and we began to link Kellner's history of devising exhibitions that aim to push boundaries of form and concept, while calling to address historical injustices. We've seen him do this with the monographic exhibitions of Black artists, though not only limited to Black artists, these included Berni Searle (*Approach*, 2006), Meshac Gaba (*Tresses and Other Recent Projects*, 2007), Kay Hasan (*Urbanation*, 2008), and *The Thami Mnyele and Medu Art Ensemble Retrospective* (2008), noting the prevalence of Black male artists. Curated during his tenure as the Director of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, these exhibitions offered an intense visual mapping of these artists' creative

practices. The fact that, prior to South Africa's democratic dispensation, many of these artists would never have received such an opportunity and recognition within a public museum context made these exhibitions great historical moments. Kellner was also responsible for bringing *Africa Remix*, curated by Simon Njami, the first "mega" exhibition to come to an African city, which brought together the work of eighty-five artists from across the African continent and the diaspora. These gestures of producing challenging programming that disrupts dominant narratives has earned Kellner a place of respect and power in the South African art scene. We came to this exhibition holding the same high esteem, expecting to be swept away by yet another brave gesture and example of critical engagement, this time, focused on Black women artists.

Much to our delight, as we walked through the exhibition we were moved by how it psychologically and physically affected us, successfully choreographing our movement, which was made possible by the intervention of a viewing deck and the attention given to the display of each work. To us, this evidences care for and detail about how the work is viewed. The elevation of the exhibition floor, especially in experiencing the sculptural and two-dimensional works, showed Kellner's curatorial sensibility. The intervention of a raised deck, instead of the dreaded-shrine-creating-pedestals, was an impressive disruption to established exhibition aesthetics and created an intimate viewing experience. It demonstrated an interesting conceptual consideration of space as it required you to step down from the deck when watching video work, which created a critical break in the entire viewing experience. The layout also emphasised the demarcation between selections of works and their thematic groupings.

Through the elevated deck, Kellner not only directed the viewers' movement but also their attention towards the containment of groupings within the exhibition, what he called "worlds": *The Fall*, *The Body*, and *Hybridity*. These worlds proposed "a realm in which these subjects explore worlds of their own choosing, in which they might be mother, martyr, warrior or hybrid" (press release). While the exhibition suggests that these worlds are of the artists' choosing, the constructed temporariness of the site compelled us to pay more attention to what was actually being offered in each section.¹³

It is this kind of considered spatial intervention that speaks to the advanced level of curatorial practice and discourse in this country, of which Kellner has become a key proponent. This ability to affect space, which speaks to what we read as the continuation of the grammar of exhibition and what Jennifer Fisher¹⁴ calls "exhibitionary affect," plays a significant role in how we experience exhibitions. The concept of exhibitionary affect evokes how unconscious and conscious sensorial experiences often respond to deliberate curatorial strategies, and at the same time produce or reflect institutional ideologies. In this instance, we would argue, exhibitionary affect to some extent draws the visitor's attention away from the conceptual underpinnings of the particular grouping, towards the aesthetic choreography of the exhibition. While this kind of spatial intervention is remarkable, it is also a demonstration of the financial power of private institutions that is seldom possible for public museums. This further illustrates the unevenness of power (resources and finances) of museums in South Africa.

So, while we were excited by these curatorial gestures, at the same time we were taken aback by the incongruence between how we experienced the space and how these artists' works came together. After walking around the exhibition, we started to question the relationship between the physical manifestation of the exhibition and the curatorial concept. The more we unpacked the concept, the more and more we were

confronted by an inconsistency between these two things. Unconvinced by the conceptual framing of why they come together and how their works were grouped, the question that came to mind was, *what is it about these artists works that speaks to “female identities”?* But, most importantly, *what are female identities?* Furthermore, why is this notion of female identities answerable through a group show, when the very same curator has shown us the power of monographic exhibitions focused on Black male artists that he curated many years ago, and about which he proudly boasts.¹⁵ Why do historical questions relating to Black women seem only to be answered in group shows?

Perhaps Nochlin’s question about the different treatment of women artists compared to male artists still rings true, and more consideration needs to be given to why group shows are organised, beyond gendered and identity groupings. Otherwise, we risk yet again “overlooking” the contributions of Black women artists if they are only considered through groupings linked to gender and race. For us, such surface readings no longer hold a valid place in the public imagination of Black women as equal intellectual contributors to the knowledge production and writing of the South African contemporary art canon and its relationship to the Global South. While group shows continue to have a valid function in demonstrating how different groupings of works offer different narratives, those narratives can and should move beyond historical trappings if they are to engender new imaginative and political possibilities. As Kellner has previously shown, there is a greater demand for monographic exhibitions (solos or retrospectives), as they allow the public the space to understand the value and intellectual contribution of artists’ works. So why is it impossible for more Black women artists to be given proper space and recognition within the South African “museum” context?

Before we rule out the possibilities of the group show for Black women artists entirely, in the following sections we look further into this exhibition, to highlight its overlooked areas of thinking and conceptualisation.

First, the interchangeable use of the words, female and woman.

From a simple click on social media, you can find a host of comments and basic explanations about the troubling interchangeable use of the words, female and woman. To cite one example, in their Instagram post, @feminismandotherthings cautions the uncritical use of female and woman and how the careless use of these words can reproduce unintended demeaning connotations. To warn their followers, they state:

Post 1: Reasons to stop calling women “females”.

Post 2: Female and woman mean different things. Female refers to the sex of a species and woman specifically refers to a human being. Female could be in reference to any species.

Post 3: It’s grammatically wrong. The word in its primary usage is an adjective. When used as a noun, the subject you’re referring to is erased. Example:

*“I talked to a female yesterday”
“a female what? A female kangaroo? A giraffe?”*

*It's different if you say:
"I talked to a female presidential candidate" because the subject is added
and now we know it's about a human being.*

It should be noted that the term female in front of the subject as in "female firefighter" should be used when it is necessary for context such as "the first-ever female firefighter" because otherwise, she's just a firefighter.

Post 4: When you refer to a woman as a female you are ignoring the fact that she is a female human. It reduces her to her reproductive parts and abilities which is dehumanizing and exclusionary.

Post 5: Nobody casually refers to men as "males."

*Imagine: "oh you know how males are"
...It's just weird*

Post 6: Because the word you are looking for already exists, it's "women."

While it may seem glib to reference a social media post about female vs woman, we've quoted it to demonstrate how common different gender understandings, even between simple words like female and woman, have come to be known in the public domain. Underscoring this post is the argument that while it is possible to use the terms "female" and "woman" interchangeably, if they are used correctly grammatically, today the use of such words goes beyond grammar, as the socio-politics of gender and sexuality calls for deeper consideration of how such terms can negate many other bodies who identify as women but may not necessarily be born "female." As such, by using the term "female" this exhibition ignores the fact that some of these artists might identify anywhere within the spectrum of gender and/or sexuality—which may or may not be one of the conceptual underpinnings of their practices. As Gqola reminds us, the "rediscovery and re-vision of the terrain of representation...and [t]he task of representing Blackwomen in postcolonial ways is challenging since it demands from us that we create and refashion forms of representation which continue to break new ground."¹⁶ This reminder calls for us to be mindful of dated and conservative understandings of representation. Obviously, there are many stances around the use of these terms. In certain instances, they are used for grammatical correctness, but in other instances the use is more deliberate as an ideological underscoring of gender inclusivity. Most contested is their biological and socio-cultural use to mark difference.

So, what does it mean to identify women artists as female in this exhibition, more particularly Black women artists?

Second, the word identities.

Art in South Africa since 1990 shows an intense awareness of the history of visibility in the country, how we have been trained to look at bodies, their differences and their histories. Art after 1990 not only registered the tectonic of the times in which it was crafted, but created a new way of seeing the world.¹⁷
– Gabea Baderoon

While seemingly expansive in its invocation of plurality, diversity, and multiplicity, the use of "identities" in this instance is problematic for several reasons. One, it is suggestive of a kind of perpetual generalisation and collectivisation of Black women artists' work, and thus their experiences, as in their victimisation. Generalised and collectivised, in this sense it seems as though Black women artists only make work concerned with identity issues. Two, based on this show's sub-themes—*The Fall*, *The Body*, and *Hybridity*—the word "identities" seems to only speak to the representation of the body in the sense that all these worlds in one way or another are concerned with the representation of the body. This unimaginative representation of Black women artists' work continues to make women the object of history and denies them their right to make themselves subjects of history. This is not to say that these artists do not have agency in how they have chosen to define themselves through their work, but that such framing tends to water down this position by reducing their work through the concept of "identity" as a purely bodily phenomenon. As such, it disallows the possibilities of women artists' work to speak to and represent identities outside of the physical body. This is something that curators Jeanine Howse (who ironically is a staff member of this institution, JCAF) and Amy Watson tried to avoid in their 2006 exhibition titled *Women: Photography and New Media*, "in which they located the female identity outside of the physical self and, in so doing, allowed women to transcend the entity that has held them prisoner since time immemorial."¹⁸

While a focus on the body may be the central artistic theme for most artists in the show, the broad category of "female identities of the South" has the effect of lumping all women artists together within this framework, beyond these five artists. Individual differences are thus erased, and no consideration is given to what identity might mean to many other women artists, or even the possibilities that identities could be performed, satirically, ironically, or strategically. Of course, such a narrative is common to curatorial ideologies that struggle to "read against the grain of predominantly white art discourse"¹⁹ which views Black artists' work in particular, limited ways. As a result, this kind of framing tends to put a spotlight on who curates, calling attention to the fact that the show is curated by a white male curator. This places the curator on shaky ground, as Kellner ends up reinforcing the very history that he claims to undo. It is therefore no surprise that many articles have raised the question of race. In two instances, Kellner has claimed to have no issues with his position as a white male curating a show on Black female identities. According to Mary Corrigan:

Kellner says he doesn't believe his racial and gender identity should prove a hurdle, given our society is trying to transcend these limits. He was deeply aware of each artist's practice and they were supportive of him curating this exhibition, he says.²⁰

Another article characterises Kellner's stance in a similar light:

In answer to the question of whether or not he as a white male should be curating the work of women of colour, Kellner offers the idea that he, like the artists on the show and their works, is a hybrid. "I'm a white guy in Africa. My experience is fragmented and weird. If black people can only do black things and white people can only do white things then we have a problem. Not one of the artists has had an issue [with my gender or race] and they all know my track record. The point is, I love art and I love doing this."²¹

– Tymon Smith

Of course, it is easy for Kellner to dismiss the power dynamics that make him the trusted authority to be able to speak on behalf of those artists. Why should these artists have a problem with his race when he has had long relationships with them through his powerful positions running different South African art institutions for decades, institutions that have at times financially supported their careers by buying work for their collections? And if we are talking about a fair playing field, why does Kellner need to stress the colour of these artists—if we have truly reached a place of curatorial diversity beyond race? At what point does he consider the history of the white male gaze that has for centuries problematically placed the Black female body on display? This is not to dismiss the agency of these artists, who have good enough reputations and strong enough voices to walk away from damaging projects. But there is a slippery line between overlooking pseudo-radicality in pursuit of staying relevant. The workings of patronage are another threshold of power that can often be seen as unthreatening yet still reproduce forms of silencing and passivity. It is therefore quite reductive that today the curator can simply dismiss the nuances that make South Africa unique and complex when it comes to race politics.

Yet again, it is clear that the entire approach has been that of simplification even in the use of terms like identity since, as we have argued, there is much more than identity in the works of the exhibiting artists. Evident across their work is the notion of violence, which, when read through the generic concept of identity, becomes erased or suppressed. An example of this is evident in the work of Neshat’s *The Book of Kings* (fig. 1). The work is named after the ancient book *Shahnameh*, a long poem of epic tragedies written by the Persian poet Ferdowzi. Originally comprised of fifty-six portraits, which were inspired by the Arab Spring, the work captures the faces of Iranian and Arab youth active in this political uprising. In this exhibition, only three portraits from the series are on display. A curiosity, that a work of both silent poetry—each portrait is



Fig. 1. Installation view: Shirin Neshat, *Nida (Patriots)*, *Sheida Jafari (Masses)* and *Sheida Dayani (Masses)*, from *The Book of Kings* series, 2012. Photograph by: Graham De Lacy. Courtesy of JCAF.

Berni Searle, *Lament I, IV, VI*, 2011. Photograph by: Graham De Lacy. Courtesy of JCAF.

meticulously scribed in Farsi calligraphy with poetry by both Ferdowzi and contemporary Iranian poets—and the undercurrent of political protest met with violence, sits in this exhibition, on the cusp of the themes of *The Fall* and *The Body*. While Neshat's work holds presence, and the gaze of defiant youth confronts the viewer, the curatorial framing mutes the interwoven presence of history, poetry, and contemporary politics. Instead, we are encouraged into a space of simply thinking about the body, the woman's body in particular, as the three portraits included in this exhibition are of women. What is the curatorial intention here? Are we simply to look at these faces of Arab youth as striking black and white portraits of bodies of contemporary Islamic womanhood, without being given the opportunity (via textual or themed reference) to think about the unknown sacrificed bodies that are commemorated in this particular work?

Displayed next to Neshat's *The Book of Kings* are three photographs from Berni Searle's *Lament* series (fig. 1). In these self-portraits, Searle's naked body, delicately covered from head to bust with a black lace veil, reveals golden painted hands, as if gilded or gloved. Searle's gaze, in these portraits, never confronts the viewer. It is either down-cast, averted, or covered by her hands. The black-veiled head reminds one of a mourning wife, mother, or woman at a Christian funeral. However, the veiled woman's body, next to Neshat's Farsi text, also makes one think about the brown body beneath this covering. A body that, in the history of South Africa, is layered with associations of the enslaved, Muslim, and coloured. We cannot think about Islam outside of race and the historical violence it is somewhat rooted to. As Baderoon states, "Islam has an intricate history of race in South Africa...The Muslim community at the Cape developed its character and practices under conditions of enslavement, enforced prostitution, colonial rule and the fraught post-emancipation period."²² Thus, we cannot neglect the inherent violence present in works that seemingly portray Muslim bodies, especially when this history is presented through the flattening lens of identity. Golden hands, pleading, gripping or covering, communicate through the portraits, gesturing simultaneously to Muslim prayer and serving, gripping and pulling, not wanting to see and weeping.

Searle's portraits, in conversation with Neshat's, require a longer pause. They require a space that allows us to read beyond biblical themes or simplistic notions of "the woman's body." The possibilities of violence that the works could respectively and then simultaneously conjure, are muted in this brief encounter of the in-between space along the passageway between the sections *The Fall* and *The Body*. Even though the press release issued by the institution presents the exhibition as a contemplative gesture, "to slow down the experience of looking at and engaging with art, so as to instil an approach to viewing art that is reflective rather than consumerist," it is interesting that this contemplation fails to take account of the glaring violence in the work. Instead it gets buried under the title "female identities," a gesture which in turn enacts a form of violence on the works. It is the avoidance of this violence that manifests as a silencing of the artists and some of the themes that are central to their work—that we question here. Or, is the exhibition insinuating that violence is part of Black "female identities"? Is the curatorial intention to suppress body politics, which ignores the complexity of the range of myths, histories, and political encounters that the works respectively demand of us, but are not given room to do so within this exhibition framework?

The last "world" of the exhibition that we enter is that of ethereal creatures/beings, in the section *Hybridity*. As described on the website: "Hybridity refers to the mingling of species, races or cultures, a crossing of one thing with another. These figures are both

abject and powerful, beautiful and repulsive. This uncomfortable ambivalence is meant to provoke a response in the viewer, who must consider the relationship between themselves and other, different subjectivities."²³ What is worrying about this "world" of the exhibition is that, much like many racial slurs heard in this country, Blackness is somehow always equated to something "animalistic." The agentive choice of the artist to portray "themselves" or characters in this way, as if merged with some form of "animal" is disregarded when framed under the banner of "hybridity." We are once again not given room to explore the possibilities of why Mntambo chooses to merge her body with a bull, or why Kher's quiet self-portrait has not been given the chance to hint at its Hindu referentiality. Linked to various mythologies, such references in these artworks pointedly disrupt the gendered origins of the characters they conjure.

If the audience is meant to "consider the relationship between themselves and other, different subjectivities," what are these different subjectivities about? The body? Blackness? The animal? Perhaps all three?

Third, the notion Global South

The broader framing of *Female Identities in the Global South* is the central area of research in a series of three exhibitions under this theme, according to the JCAF website. The prospect of such focused research into work by women artists from the vast geopolitical space of the Global South is innovative and exciting. It allows for the possibilities of truly making the works by women artists from these regions accessible and could create an interesting South-South dialogue, without the need to centre the North. However, what narrative of the Global South does this particular exhibition choose to centre? And what trappings does it fall into?

Arjun Appadurai, in his address *The Planet, the Universe and the Museum: Territories of the Imperial Imagination* presented at the launch of the JCAF, stated that, "The work of art and artists in the Global South [...] may be viewed broadly as part of the struggle to create what I may call 'artscapes,' outside of the rule of the commodity and the narrative of the nation. These works, successful or not, were produced to escape the *burden of repetition*." As stated previously, the body, present in the three worlds of the exhibition, is constantly put on display. Black women's bodies, in hybridised forms, in racialised forms, and in forms that evoke a gender binary, start to echo this burden that the artist of the Global South supposedly carries, of constantly repeating the thing that "works," of putting Black women's bodies on display. To illustrate this habit of repetition, in one year Mntambo's *The Rape of Europa* (2009) was exhibited in two exhibitions: Bongzi Bhengu's *Innovative Women: Ten Contemporary Black Women Artists* (2009), and Melissa Mboweni and Jackie McInnes' *Domestic* (2009). All these exhibitions presented Mntambo's work within the framework of identity politics without ever unpacking its reference to mythologies and fantastical elements beyond the Global South and its geographical archive. Corrigall writes about this inclusion of Nandipha Mntambo's *The Rape of Europa* (2009), pointing out that, "Given that she tries to shirk fixed notions of identity through this work, it seems ironic that it would find its way to an exhibition that pigeonholes her as a black woman." We have to ask, does Kellner not also fall into a trap of repeating dated understanding of "identities," and thus the "burden of repetition"?



Fig. 2. Installation view: Wangechi Mutu, *A Dragon Kiss Always Ends in Ashes*, 2007. Photograph by: Graham De Lacy. Courtesy of JCAF.

Along with this “burden of repetition,” Appadurai expanded to comment on how often artists from the Global South are caught in “the prison house” of their own “archive,” as many of their artworks often refer to “national civilisation and geographical archive.” In the case of *Female Identities in the Global South*, one could argue that the archive is experienced through the displayed body. Even when artists are working with and from myriad references, beyond their own “national civilisation or geographical archive,” which is the case with many works on show, the curatorial staging still imprisons them within a particular framework. To return to Baderoon’s prompt, how does this framing within the Global South represent “a national conversation about who ‘we’ are”?²⁴ And, more particularly, who is the “we” in this case? Is the body, here, further burdened to hold and respond to questions of nationhood and geography? In many respects, Kellner’s curatorial framing flattens the potential for showing how these works could speak outside of a placement in geography, as it insists on locating the works within the Global South.

Furthermore, as we viewed and read the displayed body through the exhibition, we became strikingly aware of a binary palette of black and white in many of the works, made in materials that evoke light or dark, black or white. While a beautiful aesthetic in the language of the exhibition, one cannot help but read the subtext of curated racialised bodies. The only works on show that shift outside of this palette are Wangechi Mutu’s *A Dragon Kiss Always Ends in Ashes* (fig. 2) and Bharti Kher’s *Self-portrait* (fig. 3). These works, surrounded by the burdened black and white bodies, cannot be read outside the context of racialised “femaleness.” In this way, they too are imprisoned in the curatorial packaging of the Global South as three worlds of curiosity and artscapes that always centre the Black woman’s body in relation to each other, not allowing for the possibility of different readings and meanings to emerge. The intended South-South dialogue fails to deliver beyond the “prison house” archive of the body.

Thinking about the designations “female,” “identities,” and “Global South” recalls Goniwe’s assertion about how imposed identity constructions are used to describe Black artists “as victim within the taxonomy of a particular landscape with an absurd colonial and apartheid history based on race, class, gender and other inhumanities.”²⁵ The words “female,” “identities,” and “Global South” thus emerge as imposed labels that bring about what Goniwe calls the “burden of racial representation,” akin to those of gender, race, and geopolitical representation that Appadurai invoked in his opening address.

In conclusion, it was certainly not our intention to put white writing views on yet another pedestal, by foregrounding opinions that may not be concerned with Black discourses in this essay. However, we chose writings that have widely documented this exhibition’s content with the hope of demonstrating the sociologic of the South Africa art world and its contradictions. This essay’s main point is to offer a new hypothesis that challenges certain characteristics of the art world that continue to reproduce an uneven representation of Black women artists. It is also to examine not only an art historical question around gendered and racial representations but to direct this question towards an examination of exhibition histories, which are still limited in South Africa. To this end, other parallels between the art world and the larger narrative around gender and race representation now demand further scrutiny, and we felt that this exhibition offered a significant opportunity to begin re-imagining Black women artists’ visibility not only within the art world but in the broader society. The many themes that come through the exhibited artworks deserve space for further theorisa-



Fig. 3. Installation view including Wangechi Mutu, *Water Woman*, 2017; Nandipha Mntambo, *Europa*, 2008; Bharti Kher, *Self portrait*, 2007; and Nandipha Mntambo, *Sengifikile*, 2009. Photograph by: Graham De Lacy. Courtesy of JCAF.

tion. We hope this hypothesis has demonstrated the missed opportunities and the possibilities that emerge through exhibition-making practices. A confirmation of the hypothesis has in fact come from the many Black scholars from whose work we have tried to illustrate that the logic of the art world can no longer belong to the repeated conservative authoritative views that still dominate exhibition practices, overriding the progressive work presented by the exhibiting artists. As we have demonstrated, it is not just that artworks are aestheticised, but that broader societal concerns become overburdened by conservative ideologies and the logic of a powerful few. This is not to say that there is no space to rejoice in the intersection between diverse creative worlds of the Global South, but that such moments of interaction should offer something that truly speaks to these artists' works. They should speak to current debates and the work that many scholars have done to challenge the redundant hegemonic discourse. Our concern is not to dismiss what the exhibition achieved, but to draw critical attention to the limiting frameworks that contained this Global South conversation.

The concerted effort to create visibility for Black women artists, given recent histories around public mobilisation and hype within the art world about the lack of focused attention on their work, was seemingly a move in the "right direction." However, as discussed above, such groupings come with the imposed racialised and gendered gaze of the "Black story" that easily gets flattened and collectivised and that perpetuates as a kind of victimisation or a hypervisualisation of the Black body in ways that don't seem to allow Black women artists to exist outside of the history of the gaze, race and gender confines. As we have seen here, too much political correctness can become a burden. The burden of racial, gendered, and identity representation that flattens diversity and pronounces the *burden of repetition*, which we have seen come through in Kellner's "worlds." That even beyond the curator's unique sensibility of exhibition design, there is a demand to face the politicised nature of exhibitions, what they communicate, and how they get received. This certainly speaks to Gqola's proposition of languaging in how form, structure, and aesthetic choices in conveying meaning beyond the level of content, and contribute to the broader ideological environment.

While Kellner tried to offer something different than the usual group show through his spectacular space design and selection of fewer artists with more than one work by each artist, which allowed the viewer to get a sense of their artistic progression, it, however, gives us little in terms of showing how these artists deal with certain concepts in their artworks over time. This is certainly an improvement over the "one hit, one artwork," common in group shows. This critique is important given the depth of each artists' oeuvre, which hardly gets any attention because of the grouping, even in an attempt to expand the showing, by giving each artist room for more than one work.

Reviewing these promising starts, and missed opportunities, we left the exhibition wondering what would happen if JCAF planned a series of monographic exhibitions on ten Black women artists over a period of ten years, thus giving the kind of in-depth focus that would deepen public knowledge of individual practices that they have so long lacked, and so richly deserve?

Notes

- 1** See: Linda Nochlin, "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?" in *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, eds. Vivian Gornick and Moran, Barbara (New York: Signet Book, 1972).
- 2** Black Aesthetics Exhibition panel discussion at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 16 March 2019. Panellists: Charles Nkosi, Nkululeko Khumalo, Thembinkosi Goniwe and Same Mdluli.
- 3** Gabeba Baderoon, "Intimacy and History: the art of difference and identity in South Africa" in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context Volume Four 1990-1970*, eds. Thembinkosi Goniwe, Mario Pissarra, and Mandisi Majavu (Johannesburg: Wits Press, 2011), 77.
- 4** The concept "Global South" occupies a national conversation by virtue of the show being exhibited in Johannesburg.
- 5** Pumla Dineo Gqola, "When Feminists Fight" in *Reflecting Rogue: Inside the Mind of a Feminist* (FM Book, Johannesburg, 2017), 62.
- 6** Clive Kellner, "The Grammar of the Exhibition, Biography of a Building and A Phone Call" in *Constructure: 100 Years of the JAG Building and Its Evolution of Space and Meaning*, ed. Tracy Murinik (Johannesburg: Johannesburg Art Gallery, 2015), 98.
- 7** *Ibid.*, 97.
- 8** *Ibid.*, 98.
- 9** Nkule Mabaso, "Black Women in Art," *Africanah.org*, 10 July 2017, accessed 23 January 2021, <https://africanah.org/black-women-in-art/>.
- 10** Mary Corrigan, "The Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation is the City's New 'Serious' Art Space," *Business Day: Wanted*, 21 April 2020, accessed 21 January 2021, <https://www.wantedonline.co.za/art-design/2020-04-21-the-joburg-contemporary-art-foundation-is-the-citys-new-serious-art-space/>
- 11** *Ibid.*
- 12** JCAF website, accessed 21 January 2021, <https://jcaf.org.za>.
- 13** Echoing this, the *Culture Review Magazine* states, "The exhibition design presents three other-worldly or dream-like spaces, connected by metaphorical 'bridges' that nonetheless draw attention to the constructedness of the exhibition environment." Author Unknown [specialist correspondence], "Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South," *Culture Review Magazine*, 1 September 2020, accessed 20 January 2021, <https://www.culture-review.co.za/contemporary-female-identities-in-the-global-south>.
- 14** Jennifer Fisher, "Exhibitionary Affect," *n. paradoxa: international feminist art journal* 18 (July 2006): 27–33.
- 15** Chika Okeke-Agule, "The Twenty First Century and the Mega Show: A curator's round table," *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* (Spring/Summer, 2008): 152–189.
- 16** Pumla Dineo Gqola and Ufanele Uqavile, "Blackwomen, Feminisms and Postcoloniality in Africa," *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 50, African Feminisms One (2001): 15.
- 17** Gabeba Baderoon, "Intimacy and History: The Art of Difference and Identity in South Africa," in *Visual Century: South African Art in Context Volume Four 1990-1970*, 75.
- 18** Mary Corrigan, "Women Themed Exhibitions: Aaargh!," 30 August 2009, accessed 19 January 2021, <http://corrigan.blogspot.com/2009/08/women-themed-exhibitions-aaargh.html>.
- 19** Khumo Sebambo, "Hybrids and Transformations 'Contemporary Female Identities in the Global South' at JCAF," *Artthrob*, 5 October 2020, 43, accessed 21 January 2021, <https://artthrob.co.za/2020/10/05/hybrids-and-transformations-contemporary-female-identities-in-the-global-south-at-jcaf/>.

20 Mary Corrigan, "How the Joburg Contemporary Art Foundation promotes 'slow' looking," *Mail & Guardian*, 27 November 2020, accessed 21 January 2021, <https://mg.co.za/friday/2020-11-27-how-the-joburg-contemporary-art-foundation-promotes-slow-looking/>.

21 Tymon Smith, "JCAF's debut exhibit is an intriguing exploration of female representation," *Sunday Times Lifestyle: Art*, 27 September 2020, accessed 19 January 2021, <https://www.timeslive.co.za/sunday-times/lifestyle/2020-09-27-jcafs-debut-exhibit-is-an-intriguing-exploration-of-female-representation/>.

22 Gabeba Baderoon, *Regarding Muslims: From Slavery to Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: Wits Press, 2014), 12.

23 JCAF website.

24 Baderoon, "Intimacy and History," 77.

25 Thembinkosi Goniwe, "From my Sketch Pad: Notes of a Black South African Artist," in *Coexistence: Contemporary Cultural Production in South Africa*, eds. Pamella Allers, Marilyn Martin and Zola Mtshiza (Waltham: Brandeis University, 2003), 39.

The Two Talking Yonis is an ongoing collaboration that is structured as a conversation between Reshma Chhiba (artist) and Nontobeko Ntombela (curator). Deliberating as creatives, thinkers, writers, conspirators, and sounding boards, The Two Talking Yonis was born out of a long argument about the problematic categorisation of Chhiba's art as "Indian," conferred through race and gender stereotypes. Daring each other to challenge and defamiliarise these stereotypes, The Two Talking Yonis' first project, under the same name (2013), produced a solo exhibition on Chhiba's work in three different sites in Braamfontein, Johannesburg, which took place simultaneously. Since then, this conversation has continued to expand as *The Yoni Book* in 2019 and now through an exhibition review. Experimenting with ways of seeing, speaking, and thinking, this is the first exhibition review that The Two Talking Yonis have produced together. The Two Talking Yonis see this review as an extension of their conversations with other women artists, which is premised on their individual and collective understandings of intersectional feminist lenses.

A Box of Her Own: On the Affective Power of Russian Art Archives

Elena Zaytseva

Room

Looking at the black-and-white photographic documentation of two versions of *Room N°3* by Irina Nakhova, one—that of the original installation created in her flat in Moscow in the winter of 1985—and another, a reconstruction of the work in Zimmerli Art Museum in 2016¹ – it's clear that this is the same work, but with significant differences. Both photos show a room with white walls, a white floor, and a white ceiling. All pieces of furniture are reduced to their geometrical forms and are also painted in white. The window and balcony door are covered in blinds and painted white, and the only source of light is a lamp, the sharp light of which is too weak to reach the far corners of the room. There is something strange that one can sense looking at these photographs but can't pinpoint without having visited one of the installations or read



Irina Nakhova, *Room N°3*, 1985: Installation in the artist's apartment. Photograph showing Galina Chernogaeva by: Georgy Kizevalter. Courtesy of Irina Nakhova.

a detailed description of the work in the catalogue. Only then does the strangeness of the photograph become clear: the shadows in the room are drawn on the places where they existed in reality. So, entering the installation, the visitor finds herself in a space that had real dimensions, but was an artificial place, drawn by the artist. The photo of the original work of 1985 reveals uneven creased surfaces, covered with cheap paper attached with home-made glue and airbrushed shadows. The reconstruction in Zimmerli looks like an ideal embodiment of the original, with gradations of grey shadows calculated on a computer and printed digitally. Nakhova points out² that the reconstruction of the work was, in fact, what she had envisioned in 1985, but couldn't achieve due to restricted access to materials and no access to art institutions.

The *Rooms* series occupies a momentous place in the history of Moscow conceptualism. Beginning during the cold, dark, wet, and frustratingly long winter of 1982-3, Nakhova created five different installations of *Rooms* in her apartment over five consecutive years. Each installation was made in the winter, and each turned a domestic space into a white cube, transformed by means of light, collages, and painting. "I started doing things out of extreme necessity before I even knew the term installation. It was the start of the 1980s, the Brezhnev era [...] it felt that everything was over and nothing would ever change."³ The room of the apartment was emptied of its domestic objects and turned into a space with white walls and specialist lighting (Nakhova invited a theatre lighting specialist). The *Room* therefore became a "white cube," a metaphor and representation of a Western art institution, created in the private space of an artist's apartment, at the time when the real "white cube" of the art institution was completely absent in the Soviet Union. The walls of museums and exhibition halls, controlled by the Union of Artists, were colorful and busy with contesting paintings; there was also a tradition, much-loved by Soviet designers, to cover walls of exhibition halls with fabric. These halls were, in any case, inaccessible to conceptualists.



Ira Nakhova, *Room N°3*, 2016: Installation in Zimmerli Art Museum. Courtesy of Ira Nakhova.

In the *Dialogues* of Andrey Monastyrsky with Joseph Backstein,⁴ Monastyrsky recounts that the creation of each *Room* by Nakhova was a significant event in the life of conceptualist circles in Moscow. Her *Rooms*, he said, “shook the community as no other work by any artist.”⁵ The two weeks in which each *Room* existed were marked with discussions and meetings. Ilya Kabakov, seeing *Room N°1*, praised Nakhova’s work and at the same time criticized it for the lack of social agenda: it is impossible to say where exactly this work was made, he argued⁶. Two years later, Kabakov showed his friends his first installation, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, a work that shows a succinct critique of Soviet reality.

In contrast, Nakhova’s work didn’t relate to social critique; it came from the space of feminine subjectivity: women often find solace in doing some work on their homes, transforming them somehow: “I started doing things out of extreme necessity [...]” As often happens with feminist critique, it starts from the point of subjectivity, but goes far beyond personal matters. Nakhova’s work was addressing the institutional situation: Moscow conceptualists were working as if in an imagined and idealized “Western” art institution, in the situation of the impossibility of such an institution, which Nakhova articulated by recreating a “white cube” in her small, Central Moscow apartment. The representation of an art institution in the form of a small local “white cube” accentuated an institutional demand coming from a tight group of artists who envisioned the possibility of such an ideal institution, one free of the flaws of both the Soviet system and the corrupting influences of a free market in a real, Western “white cube.” When recreated in Zimmerli Art Museum in 2016 in its original dimensions, *Room N°3* was placed inside a big museum space with high ceilings: stepping inside, the viewer could feel the difference between the real spacious “white cube” of the museum and the small imaginative one, finding herself within a space that was half real, half drawn by the artist.

Rooms are by all means the most influential works of Moscow conceptualism, and they are some of the finest examples of feminist institutional critique, created at a time when feminism was practically mute in Russia.⁷ There was almost a decade-long gap between the forced emigration of a generation of feminists who published the *samizdat* magazines *Women and Russia* and *Maria*—Tatiana Goricheva, Tatiana Mamonova, Natalia Malakhovskaya, and Yulia Voznesenskay—and a powerful wave of feminist art exhibitions of the 1990s in Russia. Tatyana Mamonova argued that the non-official art world was misogynist and male-dominated. In fact, the history of it until recently was written as the history of male leaders with big ideas. However, it is important to underline that: 1) the artist who first articulated institutional critique, specific for the place and time and within that milieu, was a woman; 2) her works “shook the community” and provided a powerful impetus to the art of total installation; 3) the reconfiguration of private/domestic as institutional/political and producing works from a place of vulnerability, subjectivity and sensitivity put Nakhova’s installations of the 1980s alongside the works of Western feminists of the time, such as Martha Rosler.

Rooms required the viewer’s interaction, and a series of discussions were conducted in each installation. Documentation of discussions, hand-typed in five copies, became part of the archive of Moscow conceptualism (MANI, Moscow Archive of New Art). The important feature of that archive was that it was created with the works of art, rather than as a post hoc assembly of documentation. In the situation when the “white cube” of the museum was unavailable, the archive became an institution for curating artworks, to select them and put them into a historically relevant context, preserving and opening them for future debates. Boris Groys pointed out that, “The concept of a

divine power that is perfectly sovereign and does not need any legitimization was transferred to the museum. This protestant theory of choice, which stresses the unconditional power of the chooser, is a precondition for institutional critique—the museums were criticized for how they used and abused their alleged power.⁸ In those terms, the archive of Moscow conceptualism played the humble role of vicarage: their power was conditional and restricted by their tight circle. But the choice they made, in fact, became a choice of history.

Body

Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya) started an ongoing project, *Debates on Division* (curated by Anna Bitkina), as part of the public program of *Manifesta 10* that took place in her native city of St. Petersburg. Opened in 2014, soon after the anti-LGBTQ law and annexation of Crimea, *Manifesta 10* was partly boycotted by some artists and curators. Unlike her colleagues of the *Chto Delat?* group, Gluklya decided to participate in the biennial, putting the controversies of the political situation at the very center of her project, exploring social, political, and personal ruptures that underlined the conflict. She organized an event at the Alexandrinsky Theatre where the public was invited to participate in putting together a collection of an imaginative Museum of Utopian Clothes that would collect costumes which most eloquently signify historical, political, and social forces of the time. The pieces were donated by people who were telling their stories, which were pre-recorded. The jury of arts workers judged the donations, but the final decisions about whether the items deserved a place in the museum were made by the audience voting. Gluklya wrote a backbone script, but the development of the discussions was subject to a large degree of spontaneity.

The arguments of the judges and comments from the audience revealed deep discord not only between the different politics within the art world, but also the ruptures between the politics of the creative class and the people—a most painful problem for the Russian intelligentsia since the nineteenth century. A petite woman migrant



Gluklya (Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya), *Debates on Division: When Private Becomes Public*, Manifesta 10, 2014: Documentation of performance at New Stage of Alexandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg. Photo: Nokolay Simonovsky. Courtesy of Gluklya.



Gluklya (Natalya Pershina-Yakimanskaya), *Debates on Division: When Private Becomes Public*, Manifesta 10, 2014: Documentation of performance at New Stage of Alexandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg. Photo: Nikolay Simonovsky. Courtesy of Gluklya.

worker from Kyrgyzstan offered the white dress she wore for her daughter's birthday party. Telling the story of her displacement, she said that although she worked very hard, she was confident that she would be paid for her labor, and she believed that by putting herself under the pressures of a migrant worker, she would build a brighter future for her children. This woman's donation was criticized by a judge, a left-wing political scientist for its conformity. Although the judge's argument that conformity prevents social progress was well informed and correct, the question arose: when a left-wing academic criticizes the position of a migrant woman, does he do it from a more comfortable social position? If the answer is yes, doesn't he put this woman, already deprived of many human rights and social securities, under even more oppression, this time from the privileged left? The feminist philosopher Alla Mitrofanova⁹ writes: "Feminist art, where it is on the left side of the political spectrum, is an internal opposition to the left movement, making it reconceptualize the automatic reiteration of leftist rhetoric, and pushing the formulation of issues into new circumstances, by fighting on two fronts. Feminism reveals how the right and the left in politics come close in their simplification of the system, caught by the traps of their own ideologies."¹⁰

The debates were charged with personal positions that were incompatible with each other. One jury member shared her nostalgic rumination about holidays in Crimea, while a woman in the audience answered that she is Ukrainian and, living in Russia, wears Ukrainian clothes to manifest how the conflict between the two countries plays out on her body. The conflicted atmosphere of debates dissolved when everybody was ushered outside, where they participated in a procession along the main avenues of St. Petersburg to the Monument to Gogol in Admiralty Square. After charged debates in the theatre, participants found themselves as a small and quirky group among the summer crowds of a "City Museum." They saw, they felt, how tiny their community was within the crowds of the city—and the divisions within their community looked smaller than the rupture between the city and them—and this was the same rupture between the intelligentsia and the people that was revealed during the debates and that made everybody feel uncomfortable.

The Artist's Place is on the Side of the Weak is a manifesto that Gluklya and her partner in the *Factory of Found Clothes (FFC)*,¹¹ Olga (Tsaplya) Egorova, wrote in 2002. In this statement, the rupture between the creative class and the people is revealed and worked with. Connected to this, it would be relevant to remember Tatiana Goricheva, a feminist publisher of the 1970s, who stated that she turned to feminism because she became disappointed in the elitism of dissident circles in Leningrad.¹²

Working with clothes has allowed Gluklya and Tsaplya to explore political divisions from the position of the weak and reveal the affective power of art by means of breaking boundaries and using carnivalesque strategies of exposure, absurdism, and laughter. Gluklya's strategy is like the "radical empathy" of Andrea Fraser, except her works are not entirely contained within the institutions, but spill onto the streets. Gluklya and Tsaplya's first well-known performance as FFC was *In Memory of Poor Liza* (1996). Wearing white dresses, they jumped into the Winter Canal in St. Petersburg. Reference to "Poor Liza"¹³ was important for them, as it was one of the first novels in Russian literature that asserted the priority of feelings, empathy, and compassion over rationality. Social and gender inequality is at the center of its narrative. The novel's heroine drowned herself due to an unhappy love affair with a man whose social position was superior to hers. Jumping into the cold waters of the Winter Canal, the artists used the vulnerability of their bodies in line with international feminist tradition to criticize social patterns of inequality. But, more than that, they aimed to attract attention to contemporary art at a time when contemporary art was only emerging as an institution in post-Soviet Russia. In preparation for the performance, Gluklya and Tsaplya debated the necessity of documenting the performance with their fellow artists of the radical art community in St. Petersburg. Contrary to their colleagues' opinion, such as the *Novye Tupy* group, which was against documentation, Gluklya and Tsaplya persevered and invited journalists to their action.

Thinking about art institutions as places ruled by collective agreement, mission, and cooperation and, at the same time, involved in power patterns imposed by hyper-capitalism, one imagines institutions that are embedded in the set of established agreements of democracy. Democracy, however imperfect, is a systematic tradition of theory and thought, based on values of equality and freedom, won over a long history of struggles, their values embedded in education and culture. Feminism, radicalizing left-wing struggles and enriching them with affective rhetoric and reframing them according to radical demand, comes from the same root of democracy that engendered the art institutions at their best. But what happens in regions with a relatively young tradition of contemporary art, where feminist struggles have been conducted in political conditions different from democratic contexts, which shaped feminist struggles in a different way and sometimes under different names? Coming to Russia in the first post-Soviet years and visiting studios of women artists, art critic and curator Jo Anna Isaak found a strong tradition of feminist resistance, which, wrapped in a different language, was often incompatible with Western feminist discourse: "In the course of many long, intense conversations that lasted well into the night, I have come to realize that our mutual misperceptions may prove to be the most fruitful part of interchange, for they tell a good deal about ourselves and what we are hoping to find in new social configurations for women."¹⁴

A play, *Global Congress of Post-Prostitution*¹⁵ written by philosopher Keti Chukhrov, is a satire on the hierarchies of the art world, the axis of which lies along West-East divisions. Shown at Steirischer Herbst in Graz in September 2019, the piece touches upon the most uncomfortable ruptures within the art world. The comedy is set in a

small destitute post-Soviet town in Georgia, where art workers organize a global symposium, inviting star participants from the West. Written by Georgia-born, Moscow-based Chukhrov, the piece develops into a carnivalesque and dark power game where star academics wrestle with their provincial counterparts. At a certain point, the provincial protagonist claims:

The best way for us to gain as much power as possible is to do exactly what we criticize. Denounce with the one hand and implement with the other; defy subjugation and simultaneously subjugate; deplore the extremes of techno-science and simultaneously be in the avant-garde of techno-science. You can criticize power only if you have that very power. Therefore, you first have to criticize it, then pretend that none of this power is yours, and then you control both, power and the position resisting it.¹⁶

Chukhrov's satire, coming from within the left, challenges leftist rhetoric that leaves aside real cases of physical and mental suffering caused by "careers" that most workers didn't choose voluntarily, an issue that is particularly acute in countries that don't belong to the developed West.

Archive

Art as an established institution has a large degree of power that activists can use as a resource to change the system. The artist Katrin Nenasheva decided to fight for the rights of children in foster homes. For this, she conducted a series of performances, one of which lasted for twenty-one days in the summer of 2014: she tied a bed to her back and walked around Central Moscow. She was a budding artist and had institutional support, therefore she could not be ignored by society: her performances caused public debates and led to changes in the system of fostering children in Russia. From 2005 to 2013, Eugenia Golant drew portraits of migrant workers trading on a street market, and exhibited them in the same communities in which they were made. Olga Jitlina created a board game, *Russia is a Country of Opportunities*,¹⁷ in which players can follow different routes of migration, facing all the difficulties that real work migrants have. Jitlina's game was later republished by governmental agencies as a resource to help migrants navigate the system. All these works caused real changes for the people they were trying to help.



PunkRockFemFest, 2015. Photograph by: Tatyana Sushenkova. Courtesy of Tatyana Volkova.



Daria Serenko, *Quiet Picket*, 2017, courtesy of Daria Serenko.

“I can say that if you organize a feminist project, it is very important that it has an art component in it, such as an exhibition or poetry recital,” says activist curator Tatiana Volkova.¹⁸ In 2014, domestic violence was partly decriminalized in Russia, and it triggered many feminist art projects. When the center to support women who survive domestic violence, “nasilie.net” (violence.no), was opened in Moscow, the opening was organized by artists Darya Serenko, Oxana Vasyakina, and her team who helped the center achieve publicity and reach victims of domestic violence who wouldn’t know about the center otherwise. “It is a very effective strategy because quite often an act of civil resistance stays ignored; it doesn’t have an instrument to attract public attention to the problem,” says Volkova.¹⁹

The generation that emerged in Russia after Pussy Riot’s action in the cathedral (2011) brought about activist strategies that are different from their predecessors. Abandoning the strategy of single heroic actions that inevitably fall into the patriarchal pattern of power wrestling, feminists are developing an approach of “quiet picketing” and building a flickering network of support groups, making small changes, in real life. Every day for eighteen months, Daria Serenko went out to *Quiet Picket*, with posters that she quietly unfolded in public places, engaging strangers in conversation about discrimination and sexism. A poet and artist, Serenko is determined that changes could be made on a personal level of empathy and compassion. In 2013-14, the artists Victoria Lomasko and Nadia Plungian organized the festival *Feminist Karandash*, a series of exhibitions with an intense program of discussions, workshops, counseling, and master classes in self-defense. The festival became an emerging platform for many women artists who hadn’t had the opportunity to exhibit before, thus substantially enlarging the circles of artists who work with a feminist agenda in different regions of Russia.

In these conditions, the role of museum archives rises to a level of great importance. Barely visible from the centers of power, archives collect the documentation of activists’ works, providing institutional support for them and making documentation available for exhibitions. The archive of the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow is a powerful force for activist projects, including those of feminist activism. It’s led by Alexandra Obukhova, one of the thirteen actionists who threw their bodies on the cobblestones of Red Square in the famous action “The Word” in 1991. The



Say No to Violence: How Feminists Should Work in Culture. A banner of an event, fragment. December 12th, 2019, accessed January 21, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/events/448253226089870/>

activist art section of the archive is curated by Tatiana Volkova, a curator who had organized the most profound festival of activist art in Russia, *Media Impact*. The festival, which had fifteen reincarnations (five in Moscow and ten in the regions), started as a large institutional project, a part of the Moscow Biennale, held at one of the large venues in Central Moscow with the support of corporate sponsors. It then moved towards a series of smaller events on independent platforms, when the political situation toughened, and public space narrowed. The first *Media Impact* opened in autumn 2011, a month before Pussy Riot's action in the cathedral, and two months before mass protests against undemocratic presidential elections. Later versions of *Media Impact* were held in small galleries and university seminar rooms as a series of discussions, many of which were closed by the local authorities before they had even started. In 2015, Volkova organized a feminist platform within *Media Impact*: Fem-Club, which works with different sections such as anarcho-feminism, cyber-feminism, LGBTQ+, decolonial, echo, and now all these sections of contemporary feminism in Russia comprehensively are represented in the museum archive. In a tightening political situation in Russia, activists' events are suppressed, which makes it very important that these events are institutionalized by entering into museum archives. Like the archives of the Moscow conceptualists, these archives are created and replenished together with artworks that can produce a platform for resistance.

Notes

- 1 Exhibition *Thinking Pictures* at Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, 2016, curator Jane Sharp.
- 2 Irina Nakhova, Zoom conversation with author, January 21, 2021.
- 3 Irina Nakhova, *Rooms* (Moscow: Maier, 2011), 31.
- 4 Joseph Backstein, Andrey Monastyrsky, "Introductory Dialogue," in Joseph Backstein, *Inside of the Picture: Essays and Dialogues About Contemporary Art* (Moscow: New Literature Review, 2015 (in Russian)), 154-176.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 175.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 174

7 Later in her career, in the 1990s, Nakhova created a strong body of work that explored gender-related social patterns, and these works were shown in milestone feminist exhibitions. See: *Zen Art 1989 - 2009: The History of Gender and Art in Post-Soviet Space* (Moscow: Moscow Museum of Modern Art Publishing Program, 2010).

8 Boris Groys, "Art Workers: Between Utopia and the Archive," *e-flux Journal* 45, last accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/45/60134/art-workers-between-utopia-and-the-archive/>.

9 Alla Mitrofanova is also a co-founder founder of the Cyberfemin Club, which was the first feminist organization in post-Soviet Russia.

10 Alla Mitrofanova, "The Public and the Political in Feminist Statement: Street Actions in St. Petersburg and the Pussy Riot Case," *n.paradoxa* 32 (July 2013): 5-12.

11 *Factory of Found Clothes (FFC)* (1995-2014) was group of two artists, Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya) and Tsaplya (Olga Egorova), who also were co-founders of the Chto Delat? group.

12 Tatiana Goricheva, "I Got Bored with Covertness and Elitism of the 'Second Culture,'" *Gefter* February 26, 2016, accessed January 29, 2021, <http://gefter.ru/archive/17640>.

13 "Poor Liza" is a short story by Nikolay Karamzin, first published in 1792.

14 Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 7.

15 *Global Congress of Post-Prostitution, 58'*, is a dark comedy written by Keti Chukhrov, staged by Guram Matskhonashvili, which premiered at the festival Steirischer Herbst in Graz in September 2019 (curators Ekaterina Degot, Dominik Müller).

16 *Ibid.*, 43'.

17 Olga Jitlina and ADC Memorial, *Russia is a Country of Opportunities*, board game, Olga Jitlina (idea), Andrey Yakimov (consultant), David Ter-Oganyan (drawing), Galina Jitlina, Alexander Lyakh (development), Tatiana Alexandrova, Nadezhda Voskresenskaya (design), 2011–2012.

18 Tatyana Volkova, conversation with the author, October 10, 2019.

19 *Ibid.*

Elena Zaytseva is an independent curator and historian of art, a former Associate Curator of Pushkin House, London. From 2003 to 2007, she worked as a curator at the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, where she co-curated major exhibitions of contemporary art, collection displays, and series of lectures and talks on modern and contemporary art. She curated special projects of the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art (2005-2007) and exhibitions in independent art spaces in Moscow and London. She holds a PhD from the Research Institute of Theory and History of Fine Arts, Moscow, and an MFA in Curating from Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a co-editor of *Cosmic Shift: Russian Contemporary Art Writing*, published in English by ZED Books, London, in 2017.

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Executive Editor

Dorothee Richter

Editors at Large

Dorothee Richter, Ronald Kolb

Editors Issue 52

Helena Reckitt, Dorothee Richter

Contributors

Romane Bernard, Nanne Buurman, Sofia Cecere, Ève Chabanon, Emelie Chhangur, Anna Colin, Angela Dimitrakaki, Berit Fischer, Jennifer Fisher, Thelma Gaster, Nandita Ghandi, Janna Graham, Althea Greenan, Jeanne Guillou, Husseina Hamza, Merete Ipsen, Joyce Jacca, Tracey Jarrett, Daria Khan, Sharlene Khan, La Sala (Alba Colomo and Lucy Lopez), Barbara Lefebvre, Séraphine Le Maire, Oksana Luyssen, Rosa Martínez, Alex Martinis Roe, Erin McCutcheon, Rose Moreau, Camille Morineau, Adele Patrick, Madeleine Planeix-Crocker, Jeanne Porte, Laurence Rassel, Helena Reckitt, Maura Reilly, Dorothee Richter, Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps (SKGAL), Nizan Shaked, Cornelia Sollfrank, Ann Sutherland Harris, The Two Talking Yonis, Miska Tokarek, Elena Zaytseva, Catherine de Zegher

Copy Editing

Stephanie Carwin

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Toni-Areal,
Pfingstweidstrasse 96,
8005 Zurich
info@oncurating.org
www.on-curating.org

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