

Taking Care: Feminist Curatorial Pasts, Presents and Futures

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Jenny Richards
and Catherine Spencer

This conversation took place electronically in March 2016 between four art historians and curators who have been involved with the Edinburgh-based reading group "Social Reproduction in Art, Life and Struggle". Established in 2014 by Victoria Horne and Kirsten Lloyd, our discussions have so far ranged from witch hunting and the refusal to reproduce, to the politics of communal housing and debates about "dual systems theory" in feminism. Questions concerning the feminist commons have recurred, as has the theme of labour. In the exchange that follows we draw from the debates that emerged through both these meetings and a series of research workshops organised by Victoria Horne, Kirsten Lloyd and Catherine Spencer that dealt more explicitly with the practical and conceptual aspects of curatorship and exhibition-making: "Curating Materiality: Feminism and Contemporary Art History" and "The Fabric: Social Reproduction, Women's History and Art" (both University of Edinburgh, June 2015); "Archive Materials: Feminism, Performance and Art History in the UK" (University of St Andrews, October 2015); and "Writing/Curating/Making Feminist Art Histories" (University of Edinburgh, March 2014).

We each come to the topic of "curating in feminist thought" from different perspectives: Victoria and Catherine have a background in the university and their knowledge has been formed primarily through exhibition histories and academic discourse; Kirsten is an independent curator and contemporary art historian; Jenny Richards is currently the co-Director of Konsthall C in Stockholm. Together with Jens Strandberg she runs the programme *Home Works* responding to the institution's location within a com-

munity laundry, and questions surrounding the politics of domestic work and the home.



1

1: Curatorial Histories, Curatorial Labour

Victoria Horne: It's revealing that the second issue of Hilary Robinson's *Feminism-Art-Theory* anthology contains a section on "Curating Feminisms", which the first issue did not¹. This reflects a generally heightened visibility that is most immediately attributable to the increased market interest in feminist art and the number of historical exhibitions mounted between 2005 and 2012², but is also (we hope) due to a renewal of feminist and left popular politics in the wake of the 2008 financial crises.

Catherine Spencer: The impact of these latter elements also informs recent contributions to the field such as Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry's edited volume *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*³.

VH: Yes, these publications alert us to the contradictory position of feminist critique now that art associated with the feminist movements of the late 20th and early 21st centuries is being collected, exhibited and even commissioned by large-scale institutions. But from another perspective we can say that we have access to an increasingly comprehensive history of feminist exhibitions and feminist organising in the arts. My question is this: if we recognise that the history of feminist curatorial practice is still comparatively lacking, is this neglect mainly attributable to the difficulties (or impossibilities) inherent to writing such a history?

CS: Processes of exhibition making and display have been fundamental to the histories of feminist art production—the two have developed in tandem as works have entered, altered, and resisted or rejected museum and gallery institutions. I agree though that there are perhaps less well-defined histories of “feminist curating”, and that such histories would need to look beyond recognisable and traditional institutional roles, while simultaneously recovering the work that has been done through established channels, but which has needed to remain hidden so that it can operate. And equally acknowledge that a feminist practice may be pitted directly against received notions of curatorship.

Kirsten Lloyd: I agree that the conception of the curator as an individual invested with the authority to select, operating at a distance from the process of production or even action is insufficient, particularly in this context. Though there have been a few calls recently to bind the definition of curating exclusively to exhibition-making, here we have to expand beyond the perimeters of the display space, or at least appreciate their porosity⁴. To my mind we need to develop a more nuanced understanding capable of addressing the curatorial function in social practice (or indeed curating as social practice), as well as the complexity of durational feminist curatorial entanglements with smaller, more experimental institutions. In other words activities that intervene in, reimagine, or remake structures.

Jenny Richards: The task of charting the effects these artistic and curatorial practices have had in shaping institutions is also far from simple, particularly as the resonances of this work operates according to temporalities that do not align with a chronological lineage. It makes me think of Mierle Laderman Ukeles' *The Keeping of the Keys: Maintenance Art as Security* (1973) created at the Wads-

worth Atheneum in the U.S.: Ukeles took the museum guards' keys and locked and unlocked different galleries and offices, blocking access to rooms as they became designated as sites of “maintenance art”. As Helen Molesworth notes, her role as artist “allowed her to explore the ramifications of making maintenance labour visible in public”, yet crucially that labour was made visible to the institution as well⁵.

VH: Your comments remind me of a 1992 essay by Griselda Pollock where she suggests that, in direct opposition to modernism's privileging of the studio as the primary space of creation, materialist feminism focuses our attention toward the gallery, exhibition-making, criticism, etc., as “interdependent moments in the cultural circuit of capitalist production and consumption”⁶. Undoubtedly, the decades since have seen art history place far greater emphasis on these very processes. Yet while Pollock's suggestion has been formally acceded, we could argue that the expanded notion of the “curatorial” has been reframed as another primary, creative act performed by a re-imagined romantic subject.



2

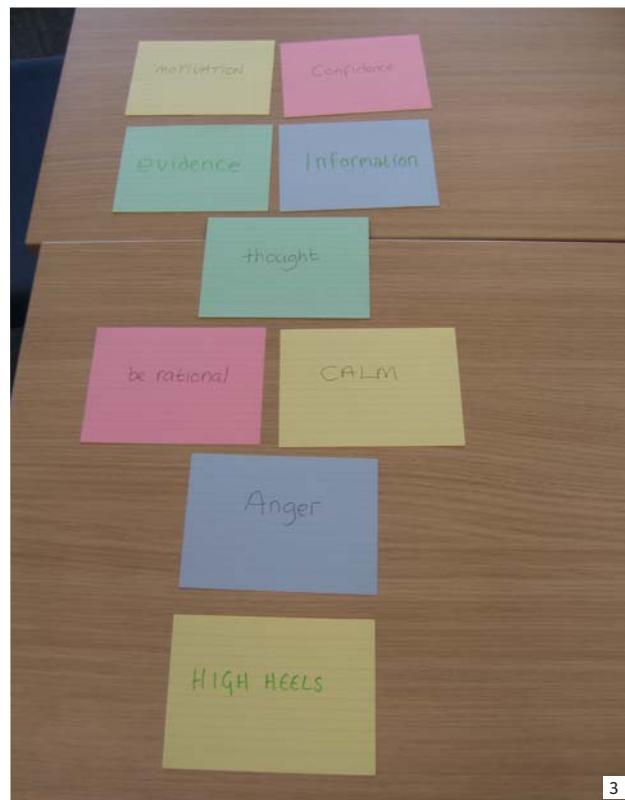
KL: Yes, I think it was Ruth Noack who observed that we are in the midst of a “curatorial epidemic”. And this diagnosis can easily be confirmed by a glance at the swelling ranks of postgraduate cohorts on curatorial programmes, or the widespread appropriation of the term across disciplines and sectors. Of course this ascendancy of the curator can be framed as an *economic symptom*; her rise beautifully aligning with the demand for entrepreneurship, precarity, networks, and mobility. These arguments are by now well-rehearsed. Vesna Madžoski describes the lot of this new breed of “she-curator” as a precarious “girl for all”, capable of performing a multitude of formerly distinct tasks by herself⁷. The feminisation not only of labour but of survival springs to mind here. Jenny, you

recently used a phrase that really struck a chord with me: "the coping curator". Can you expand on this? What are the realities of curatorial labour today? Service provider? Professional carer? Hostess?⁸

JR: Where to begin! The coping curator is what we are all meant to be right? That woman who looks great, perfect lipstick, never needs to sleep and as Arlie Hochschild says, "offering only the clean house (gallery) and welcoming smile"⁹. But of course that figure doesn't exist—well she doesn't live in me! Instead, to meet the demand, one must split oneself, pushing—as Hochschild highlights—the messy, difficult, undesirable work into the background, in order to leave a cleansed version of that role in the public. In efforts to critique the gendered categorisation of work and its expansion, you often come to perform the very figure you are trying to examine and erode. It is really hard to try and change this pattern. This form of self-exploitation and the slippage into this role is something that I try to address through expressing the marked paradox of this work publicly. For example, if Konsthall C is asked to make a public presentation then Jens and I make a point to talk about our role as "directors" as that of janitor / chef / cleaner / therapist / friend / organiser / builder / teacher / administrator / artist, etc. These are all roles and forms of work crucial to curating and being able to organise and work together, but often not articulated. Following the work of Silvia Federici and the strategies of the *Wages for Housework* campaign, the act of exposing the culturally hidden aspects of our role is important to how we can better understand the underlying exploitative structures of our working.

VH: I feel wary of claiming endurance predominantly for curators, or creative labourers more generally. Angela McRobbie recently published an article called "Notes on the Perfect", where this perfection functions not only to exacerbate competition *between* women, but to produce a heightened *self*-beratement which she locates as the direct outcome of (punishment *for*) the gains of second-wave feminism¹⁰. As a set of descriptors I find her article painfully accurate (as is your quip about great lipstick, Jenny!) and from discussions I've had with friends I know it to be true across disciplines/careers. Perhaps the gift—or curse—of curating and writing is that it gives us a context to actually reflect on these unattainable demands? And perhaps then we need to consider the potential of work-refusal, or try and take seriously the "good enough" attitude of ordinariness¹¹. Of course that's easier said than done.

JR: Yes, absolutely, this of course isn't limited to creative labourers but felt across different sectors and working (and non-working!) positions. Sophie Hope and I run a project called *Manual Labours* that explores physical relationships to contemporary work. Here we try to find ways to connect with workers in other fields of work with very different circumstances and conditions. Within this project the practice of saying NO to work—or as you say Vicky "work-refusal"—has arisen as a strategy to address the fragmenting and disempowering effects that current (often precarious) working conditions produce. We're currently working on a stage of the project called *The Complaining Body* that looks at the world of workplace complaints with call centre workers, university staff and commuters. Rather than investigating complaining bodies, we found instead a plethora of uncomplaining bodies; individuals who were unable to find a way to articulate their work struggles or to say "no" to working unpaid overtime. The reasons given ranged from fear of losing their job to more gendered perspectives on complaining, including appearing like the stereotypical nagging woman. This is a feeling Sarah Ahmed brilliantly analyses in *Feminist Killjoys*¹². So how do we find ways to critically and practically disrupt the working conditions that we inherit and perpetuate?

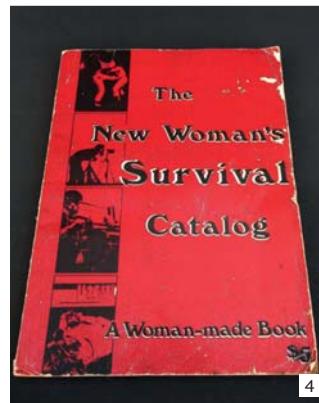


KL: All of this puts me in mind of something that I've been concerned with for some time now, which is the value that concepts of social reproduction elaborated in feminist political economy can bring to analyses of contemporary art and curatorship. Though recent literature has expanded the term's scope, historically it has referred to the "labour of love" traditionally performed for free by women in the home to sustain and replenish the working population. Kathi Weeks's observations on the interpenetration of production and reproduction seem to describe perfectly the shift in emphasis that you described earlier Jenny, and it is one that I have certainly experienced in relation to my own work. In her words: "Not only is reproductive labour more clearly productive today, as evidenced by its many waged forms, but productive labour is increasingly reproductive in the sense that it often creates not only strictly economic goods and services but also social landscapes, communicative contexts, and cultural forms"¹³. So while a great deal of attention has been given over to curatorial knowledge production, this perspective really begins to open up the potential to examine other important—yet deeply connected—aspects of the curatorial process including the complexities of care and the creation of socialities.

VH: Returning to Kirsten's observation on the increased professionalisation of curators, primarily through postgraduate programmes; Felicity Allen gave a talk recently in which she noted that these processes of professionalization are often exploited to exclude certain people. I'll quote her at length as I think it offers a very useful historical dimension to the discussion we're having:

"The histories of curating produced as a result of the need for reference books to teach with ... have yet to recognise the work of the mostly anonymous and female gallery educators who preceded them, while a heroic avant-garde is celebrated [...] I have argued that the continuing negation of gallery education as a specific form of radical curation in Britain since the 1980s is comparable to the negation of women's reproductive labour; that is, I am referring to the 1970s analysis of women's domestic labour which showed it was systematically unrecognised and unpaid – it [gallery education] was in fact a model of life as work and, sometimes, art as life. While gallery education has frequently been paid, contracts have often been precarious and, crucially, it is—accurately or not—associated with women and children"¹⁴.

CS: This links up with what you were saying at the beginning of our discussion, Vicky; in terms of the last two decades at least (if not longer), histories of feminist curating would need to account for the work done in education departments, often by predominantly if not entirely female staff as Allen points out. In major institutions (such as Tate and the National Gallery) education departments are structurally demarcated as separate from the curatorial departments, even if there may be significant overlaps in actual working practice—particularly, for example, in commissioning social art practice as you mentioned, Kirsten. And, of course, since 2008 gallery education work has become increasingly precarious and under-funded.



2. Feminist Politics and the Institution

VH: Since the 1990s (and especially the mid-2000s), the increased absorption by museums of art associated with the feminist movement has coincided with a massive expansion of those same institutions. It seems we urgently need to trace and theorise more comprehensively the contradictions of these coincident developments. If we listen to Hester Eisenstein's arguments about feminism's "seduction" by corporate interests, we start to understand how feminist ideals can be used to refurbish rather than revolutionise the museum¹⁵.

KL: These questions about the "compatibility" of feminism and the museum, as well as the latter's neutralisation of politics, have of course been around for some time, but I agree that it needs to be reconsidered in relation to current circumstances.

VH: Indeed, and whether institutional opposition results in neutralisation, or co-optation. When

thinking about feminism's beleaguered relationship with the museum, we can look to the long history of protest against those institutions; not only from within the post-war cultural sphere, but even thinking back to Mary Richardson slashing the Rokeby Venus, or Mary Wood attacking Singer Sargent's portrait of Henry James. In Wood's words, "I have tried to destroy a valuable picture because I wish to show the public that they have no security for their property nor their art treasures until women are given political freedom".¹⁶ This reveals the impasse between feminist politics and a particular kind of institution, at least in patriarchal-capitalist conditions, which serves to shore up economic value and gendered distinction.

JR: Yes, there are institutions that engage periodically with feminism as an “issue”, and then there’s the question of what does—or might—a feminist institution look like? And what tools are needed to build it? I’m thinking about grassroots cultural productions that attempt to build entirely new forms of culture from the bottom up. *The New Women’s Survival Catalog* is a brilliant feminist manual from 1973. Fed up with efforts to change “the master’s house” from the inside, they sought to grow a new type of culture based on the need, desires and experiential knowledge of their collective. Six women travelled over 12000 miles to research, meet, document, and share thriving feminist practices across the U.S. For me there seems to be something critical in the “doing”, in trying things out. *The New Women’s Survival Catalog* took shape through the practices it drew from and, in turn, supported and inspired further activity. Is there something to be learnt from this approach, the potential in the material and physical efforts of making, that maybe can equip us with some new tools for imagining other models? In practical terms there are many complexities presented by institution building, some we’ve already touched upon—namely economy and time (two things we all seem to struggle with).

VH: Do you think the museum itself retains any potential? Might we see it as a place that not only shores up the existing social order but provides an opportunity to create new publics or new horizons? Or will a “feminist” art museum or curatorial practice always be necessarily compromised? Here I’m interested in the institutional operations (funding, access) that might act to re-secure power even against the exhibition/artworks on display. So, for example, what does it mean to display The Hackney Flashers’ activist documentary project *Who’s Holding the Baby?* (1978) in a contemporary art museum? And if that museum

provides a free crèche (as the collective first demanded in a 1979 exhibition at the Hayward), does that institutional change evidence some measure of success in their artistic critique?

CS: *Who’s Holding the Baby?* was included in a show at Nottingham Contemporary called *Somewhat Abstract* in 2014. It was a really interesting show that featured items from the Arts Council Collection, and it was great to see *Who’s Holding the Baby?* within that context, but the crèche element was missing, so it could be argued this was an example of a feminist work not actually being curated in a feminist way. Which goes back to the point that while we may feel we have increasing access to a history of feminist art-making, the ways in which that has both been interlinked with and helped to inform feminist curatorial practice (as well as how feminist production might be hampered by traditional curatorial practice) are perhaps still less immediately clear.

VH: Helen Molesworth evidences this conceptual difficulty, when she honestly admits: “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”¹⁷. Is there a friction between theory and practice, about how to translate fairly abstract ideas about politics into the material space of the exhibition?

KL: In many ways I don’t find this admission surprising, after all the essay is by definition an exploratory, provisional form, an arena to test ideas. If the museum’s literary equivalent is the encyclopaedia, the “laboratory” approaches associated with new institutionalism seemed to offer something more akin to an essayist practice, yet this moment has now pretty much passed. In thinking about feminist curatorial futures and, in particular, their association with the institution (broadly defined), where might we go from here? Jenny, going back to your question as to what constitutes a feminist institution, what are your thoughts on this? Your programme at Konsthall C is clearly aligned with your feminist politics, but I wonder if its impact has gone beyond the visible curatorial themes and specific artistic projects to influence structures, approaches, and ways of working as well?

JR: This is a really important point, and something we think about a lot. It links to some of the earlier points on how to expose the hidden labours of the institution in order to reorganise and value labour differently. On a structural level, details such as having a flat pay structure, so that everyone working at Konsthall C is paid the same, is fundamental

in practicing the politics we try and discuss through the programmes (credit should go to Anna Ahlstrand and Kim Einarsson who instituted this during their tenure). It provides the foundation for a more collective approach to working, where our politics can't just be gesturally explored in the content of exhibitions. We also rotate our work tasks so that everyone is involved in the different jobs at the Konsthall. Jens also has an app on his phone called "hours tracker" that records the time we spend working. Whilst the demands of the Konsthall mean that we can't be paid for the real hours we do, we can still measure and communicate them to the board and our funders.

KL: So you see a future for the feminist institution more generally then? I'm also interested to hear how such internal structural adjustments resonate with (or impact upon) those whom your activities are designed to engage with and indeed how you engage with them.

JR: I see a future in people playing with institutions. For example when Konsthall C was set up by the artist Per Hasselberg and the neighbourhood council of the area "Hökarängens Stadsrådet" they decided to call the space *Konsthall C*. This naming act was a performative gesture to allow what was essentially in the beginning an art project to access institutional funding. Looking back now, continuing to think of the space as an evolving public artwork is conceptually fruitful; it encourages us to push the space in directions other than the standardised development art organisations are expected to follow. Building on from that, I think this play between structure and audience is important to examine. How much of your organisational working bleeds out into the space; into the way the audiences experience the exhibitions? I see it happening on different levels. In Konsthall C's case, one part is the different audiences that come to connect to the programme. Our explicit commitment to challenging the devaluation of domestic labour propels our programme to find ways to work with audiences and groups that are engaged in these politics, too. For example the last two projects with Ciara Phillips and Stephan Dille-muth have tried to find ways to support the activist group Hemtjänstupproret, an organization of home care workers challenging their oppressive working conditions. We began a relationship with them last year when we organised a discussion between the writer Gunilla Lundahl and Clara Lindblom—Stockholm's councillor responsible for elderly care—which drew on Lundahl's research into the monitoring of

home care workers through a GPS app. Representatives from the union Kommunal and activists from Hemtjänstupproret were invited to discuss the regulatory scheme and argue for the changes that could be made. This event became really important in how the activities inside the Konsthall can go beyond this site to support and care for those struggles happening in the private homes around the gallery.



5

3. Feminist Temporalities and Duration

CS: One of the threads running through our discussions and events has been temporality. This relates to debates about social reproduction, in terms of hidden time and hidden labour, but also models of durational and generational time. Duration offers one alternative to cyclical time or the "waves" model of feminism, and might ensure that longer histories are not lost, but don't become constricting. This is signalled by, for example, the title of the *Feminist Duration Reading Group* in London¹⁸. The temporality of the reading group, as an organisation that must of necessity take time and evolve at a gradual but ideally accumulative pace, could be a useful model for curatorial practice. Equally, the sometimes recursive, sometimes discursive temporality of the reading group model has connections with the pedagogic time of the seminar room, and also perhaps offers a slightly different perspective on the intense interest in re-performance and restaging in relation to both feminist art and curatorial practice during the 2000s.

VH: For some time now I have had a niggling thought that the reading group format bears some relation to the broader historical operations of re-performance, re-enactment, and turn to the historiographical or archival in contemporary art. That in an increasingly digital age we frequently find ourselves returning to forms of communication and cul-

ture (the reading group, the fanzine etc.) which were actually very significant to feminist political organising in the late 20th century. (I don't want to suggest they even went away entirely of course). These forms seem unmistakably to offer means of community-building and sharing that can be great sources of strength in our precarious working environments today.

KL: The importance of sharing "real time" in terms of creating the conditions for solidarity.

JR: Definitely, or the workshop format that creates the conditions for being together but also for making things together.

CS: Yet at the same time there is a need to acknowledge the potentially exclusive operation of group formation, and the privilege that can coexist with precarity. Those two things often oscillate, sometimes with productive, sometimes deeply destabilizing effects, in our professional relationships with institutions both academic and artistic.

VH: That's very true. Perhaps this contradictory "oscillation" is matched by feminism's broader struggle between critique and complicity in relation to art's institutions. Jo Freeman's powerful essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" is perhaps an important reference point also for thinking about collective organising and the impossibility of total freedom beyond existing operations of power—the idea that structurelessness is not only impossible but would in all likelihood also be repressive¹⁹. More recently Andrea Fraser has comparably reminded us that "we" are the institution also and cannot escape it²⁰.

CS: Agreed; these were important debates that happened during and as a result of the women's movement in the 1970s, and it would be a shame to repeat those conversations (though I don't get the sense we are, or at least hope not). But there is also a feeling of not wanting to assume knowledge, perhaps, that leads to the kind of repetition you were just talking about Vicky—or the "re-performance" of knowledge. So it is not simply fetishization on the one hand or ignorance on the other, but combined with worries about imposter syndrome, being somehow behind and needing to "catch up".

VH: Imposter syndrome is certainly a factor! I also think there's a link to be drawn here to what Jenny said earlier about "coping" and the demands of perfectionism. The association between this never-ending drive and repetition, or the inability to move forward, is one that I hadn't considered before. Think-

ing cynically, that inwardness, or backwardness in terms of the archival turns in contemporary art and academia, might imply a temporal stagnation or an inability to imagine a future²¹.

CS: Which links back to the danger you noted before that the reading group structure might inadvertently throw up some of the issues that have been very usefully interrogated in relationship to feminist re-performance. While many of these (I'm thinking of a project like *re.act.feminism #2 - a performing archive*) have been incredibly valuable for our understanding of feminist art histories, in 2011 Helena Reckitt expressed a degree of wariness about re-enactment within contemporary art more generally: "Where once I greeted news of such projects with anticipation, now a sense of ambivalence, even scepticism, mutes my response. Re-enactment, I fear, is in danger of becoming just another aesthetic trope, a backward glance that fails to shed light on why and how we remember and represent the present"²². So there is definitely a question around how we handle the temporalities of re-performance and repetition (and the work of an artist like Sharon Hayes is extremely interesting for the complexity with which it addresses these returns), which might lead us back again to the idea of durationality as something that has a sense of layered sedimentation rather than disjointed citation.

KL: In terms of this idea of durational engagements, I can see similar tendencies (and associated issues) in a number of projects or programmes that explicitly state their commitment to slower, more consciously iterative forms of curating²³. They too prioritise spending time together and creating safe spaces for exchange. Clearly, this entails a different type of interaction with institutions and there often appears to be a strong desire to flee visibility; to place value instead on the temporal shadows of curatorial production, or at least to emphasise that any public-facing facets only constitute a small element of much deeper (and longer) endeavours. I read an interesting article recently that was collaboratively written by a group of academics from North America who call themselves the *Great Lakes Feminist Geography Collective*²⁴. They call for a feminist politics of resistance predicated on slow time—on taking time. Though their aim is to counter the relentless acceleration of time(lines) in the neoliberal university, the same pressures and velocities can be witnessed across a range of fields, including of course the curatorial sphere. Fast and frequent production is an essential component of visibility. But I would be wary of associating

what we might call “relational curating” to political drives to slow things down. As far as I can see the demand to keep up with accelerated rates of production remains and, as we know, the nurturing of relationships—whether with communities, allies or loved ones—requires a great deal of intensive labour!

VH: Yes, the demands of an “accelerated rate of production” names it precisely. As much as I enjoy our reading group(s), this is the contradiction that I’m aware of. While in one sense these are “slower” forms of interpersonal communication, the growth of temporary, transitional, relational feminist events is precisely due to *lack* of time. The lack of lack of slow research development that would allow us to organise or “curate” less temporary formats or produce work on a longer scale. Whether this is because of the accelerated demands of contemporary academia, or because of the sheer excitement and motivation around these topics at present, is something I don’t have the answer to. Probably a bit of both.

KL: How would those less temporary formats operate?

JR: It actually makes me think of your own approach Kirsten, especially your project ECONOMY with Angela Dimitrakaki and its evolving exhibitions, commissions, online platform, and publication, each constructing different temporalities and modes of engagement²⁵. I suppose you could also think about a project like *The Grand Domestic Revolution (GDR)*, which began in 2009, co-curated by Binna Choi and Maiko Tanaka at Casco, Utrecht. They develop what they term “living research”, or a collective exploration into the contemporary condition of the private home, where “living together” became their research methodology, to be practiced in and around the home²⁶. Collaboration and living together demand time, to build relationships and to experiment with different ways of being together. Yet, within this structure there were very different temporalities operating simultaneously, which tie with your point about the intensity of the labour a durational approach requires. It feels like there are different strategies at play; there is the formulating of open-ended durational frameworks that insist on evolving according to their own temporality, and slowness more as a mode of attention to particularities within that framework?

CS: The idea of “relational curating” feels like a suggestive, if potentially provocative, one. This might both seek to address the elisions of feminism within

“relational aesthetics” (as Helena Reckitt has shown) and the need to negotiate the tension between solidarity and nepotism that we’ve often discussed²⁷.

VH: I suppose I’m thinking about how that attention to the relational, the hidden affective networks and so on, how that work can be made more permanent for future “readers”. When I’m thinking of “longer term” preservation work, writing books, or the curating of permanent installations, collections, archives, etc., is this actually where slower research can take place? But we first need feminist archives and funding in existence to allow this. Having worked on the history of feminism and encountered the gaps in that archive, or experiencing as I am the daily struggle of funding and job applications, I am aware that these are necessary conditions for slow, thoughtful reflection. The sort of reflection that feminist history deserves. Rather than the temporary, episodic work we are compelled to do at present because of tenuous financial arrangements and the desire to always “keep up”.

JR: Exactly, and within current cultural funding the short-term project still reigns. At Konsthall C we try and work with different temporalities and cultivate a framework for a slower mode of commissioning. Our programme *Home Works* runs for two years (as that is the length of our contract) and so we invited two practices—Joanna Lombard’s and Gunilla Lundahl’s—as two-year commissions. Rather than placing an expectation on what this commission might produce (a solo exhibition, a film etc.), the invitation is based on the work they’ve carried out already, the themes and questions their work interrogates and inspires. Their respective practices offer a framework for other exhibitions and events to evolve from. By centralising the artistic practice, rather than the format funding structures cultivate, we hope to be more responsive in finding the best conditions to support their work. Thus far, it has been refreshing to see how an organisation can support the development of practices in different ways, from helping writing a PhD application to inviting an artist to develop an exhibition whose work informs questions Lundahl or Lombard are considering. Yet, the struggle in finding funding to create this framework is constant.

CS: Perhaps there is also something to be said here in terms of large-scale curatorial projects like *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007). I completely understand the criticisms that have been made of shows like this, but the legacy of this exhibi-

tion does seem to be doing something useful in terms of enabling lateral connections both temporally and geographically. Exhibitions might allow for a form of rapid translation, or a different kind of translation to the linguistic, which has also been valuable for thinking about feminism transnationally. There are also examples where technology can help create what, in a different but related context, the scholar Mechtilde Widrich has called a “delayed audience”²⁸ such as the *re.act.feminism #2* website²⁹. Perhaps the curatorial can do a certain kind of work in this respect, which it is very useful to hold on to, despite the attendant dangers of collapsing difference.

VH: In a related vein (particularly for a show like *Wack!* which many of us talk about without having experienced), the issue of translating, or reproducing, knowledge is of course a crucial one. This forces us to consider the limited timeframe of the event in comparison to the time of the collection/archive/catalogue. How do we record and translate the spatial and affective experiences of the curated exhibition across time? This relates back to my initial question of whether attempting to write histories of curating is an endeavour bound to failure?

CS: So one of the main ideas within some of this thinking is that it could be argued feminist curating needs to be open to anachronism and to re-discovery, while remaining attuned to the problematic lacunae that inform these modes of thinking. Equally, might feminist curating, in a durational mode, offer an alternative to the jumps and starts inferred by re-performance?

JR: I wonder if the feedback loop is useful as well in visualising what this curatorial approach would look like?



4. Postscript: Care and Collaboration

KL: This seems like a good juncture to ask a tricky question: what might we understand by a “feminist” curatorial approach or methodology? A lot of ideas have come up here: addressing power and taking care to power, transparency and opacity, pedagogy and solidarity, duration and excavation, structures and alliances. The concept of “care” also certainly appears to be attracting a lot of attention at the moment and it’s a big theme in your programme at Konsthall C Jenny—perhaps it provides one possible aspect of what we might start to think of as a feminist curatorial methodology.

JR: There are two points when considering care: there is the care of the organisation, in terms of both how we care for each other as workers now and how to help the organisation to persist into the future; then, connected to this is the care of the programme and its meeting with a public. To address the second part; care is taken in how the exhibition can be developed as a site of activation. How do the objects or materials within the exhibition operate to create moments of negotiation, discussion, and togetherness? But in order to create the conditions for taking care within the programme, we must first consider what urgencies need to be addressed for its users and locality. What is interesting about working around questions of domestic labour and social reproduction is that everyone can relate to it. We all have to clean, cook, and care (some more than others of course). From there we develop exhibitions that derive from a question, which we invite other artists and contributors to speculate around. In our methodology, Lundahl poses the questions to work on, which we then are able to tailor to the issues that matter in our locality. This follows what Elke Krasny describes as the long history of activating “the question as a method” in feminist thought³⁰. In terms of caring for particular subjects or contributors to the programme, for us it is crucial that domestic workers or in our case home care workers from the activist group Hemtjänstupproret are invited to join us in this work. We are not the experts nor do we have the experiential knowledge of the conditions of domestic workers, but we can invite others in with that knowledge to shape how this inquiry develops to better support and care for their working struggle.

KL: Yes, I think it’s fair to say that you take a different approach to the “taking care” of artworks than the etymological roots of the verb *curare* is usually taken to imply. My own experiences in curating

artworks that are often categorised as “social practice” have shown me that “care” passes from a concern with the *object* of art to care for the relations involved and the “project” as a whole. An important part of this process has often involved encouraging the ongoing cooperation of the institution, as I’m often not necessarily a salaried member of staff but a freelance individual with pretty limited authority to act. I don’t think I’m alone in this—as Katy Deepwell has observed the majority of feminist curating is done on a freelance basis³¹. So in thinking about the present position of the institution, perhaps we need to go back to the emergence of the women’s art movement and the absence of the external curator—the majority of these projects were self-organised and were often committed to forging new structures. If today the curator is not fully absorbed into (and secured by) the institution, she instead frequently works “in the thick of it” as Alex Farquharson suggests - with all the precarity and need for solidarity that implies³².

JR: I think your point on how the term “curate” has expanded to deal with not only caring of objects but the caring of subjects is really important Kirsten. I’ve always been anxious about using the term curate in my own work, nervous of its connection to a historical trajectory I don’t feel part of, and a set of practices and power relations which I try to work against. Yet to expand the term from its etymological root seems to offer new potential. Maybe it can be taken further to not only reassert the significance of care in this role for objects and now subjects but also the responsibility to bring a reflective perspective on the durational caring labour the role demands?

KL: So, returning to Weeks’s observations, can we view reproductive work as both thoroughly enmeshed with the demands of capital *and* as offering potential grounds for counter struggle? What do you all think about the development of a feminist politics of care, and, what can this mean in the context of curatorship?

JR: Silvia Federici springs to mind here: “Through my experience at home [...] I also discovered what I now call the ‘double character’ of reproductive work, as work that reproduces us and valorises us not only in view of our integration in the labour market but also against it.”³³ She argues that the space of the home and the work performed there has a double character—simultaneous to the invisibility of labour and power relations, it offers a space

of potentiality where other relationships and modes of communication can be formed. For me this connects to another key question for feminist curating and that is how to mobilise collectivity around feminist struggles when the categories of work and gender that we formerly might have gathered around have radically eroded. This question has become particularly pertinent since *Home Works’* investigation into the Icelandic *Women’s Day Off*, a mobilisation that happened in Iceland in 1975 to raise the visibility of female labour (both paid and unpaid), which brought the whole country to a standstill. Investigating this inspiring event now can feel disempowering as the possibility to come together and collectivise around an issue is increasingly harder—a point raised by many of those involved in the 1975 strike. With precarious contracts and freelance working there is no shared employer to unite around, and, quite rightly, the homogenous term “women” is not necessarily one we all want to identify with. So I wonder if we can add this to your question, Kirsten, as another concern to take away from this conversation: how to care for the fragmented, singular subject that we all inhabit? How do we find ways to unearth its double character or potential to form other alliances from within this site of contradiction, paradox, and struggle?

KL: To bring this text to a close, then, perhaps we could briefly reflect on the writing process itself. Inviting you all to participate in this conversation came out of a desire to extend our live interactions—to precipitate another iteration as it were—but it was also a conscious move to avoid the usual single-authored text format. We touched earlier on the potentially exclusive operations of group formation, and indeed, given the links between us all, this article could be seen as yet another example of “cronyism, nepotism, and feminism”³⁴.

VH: Your words remind me of a wonderful article written by Meredith Brown about AIR Gallery in 1970s NYC, which reminds us of the importance of “contact capital” and the building of networks, among women, through extra-institutional spaces, cooperatives and galleries³⁵. We champion or celebrate these peripheral networks, live them ourselves to an extent, and yet at what point do we start to criticise them as “cronyism”—once they become institutionalised? As Catherine mentions above, the forming of our reading group should involve an awareness of privilege...

CS: There is the politics of the “informal chat” format we have embraced here, even though it has

involved a lot of editing and shaping...so it's debatable precisely how informal it is.

JR: Definitely and beyond the structure of this article what about the language and textures we have used to try and capture feminist curatorial practices? What forms of feminist articulation have we worked with that seek to expand the limiting mode of expression through which we are pushed to valorise ourselves? This is something I often am vexed by. At the same time our approach of writing together has required us to be somewhat vulnerable, to expose the usually hidden bad spelling or the unpolished confused comment. I mentioned the possibility of printing some of our Skype chat alongside this conversation as a means to expose the messy but intimate side this text has produced. A side that perhaps better illustrates the care we are cultivating and the contradiction we are working under?

VH: Our reflection upon the politics and status of discourse has of course a long history in the humanities. I have great fondness for Irit Rogoff's feminist celebration of gossip: "An alternative history in which the concept of Modernism gets undone not necessarily by a parallel cultural heroism gendered female but by a set of small-scale actions and receptions taking place at the margins; the pleasures of conversations, the conflicts of domesticity, the agony of rejection and failed love, the spreading of rumours, all the low moments which invariably follow the high moments"³⁶.

CS: We've debated about whether or not we should end this conversation with someone else's words, but I actually think it's very fitting in terms of our thinking around the reading group structure, durationality, the need to take time to listen, care, and respond, the exchange of knowledge, and the writing of histories. Sara Ahmed talks about the importance of feminist citational practices, so this feels like a fitting point to end!³⁷

All: We would like to acknowledge and thank our fellow reading group participants for exploring with us the politics of conversation: Frances Stacey, James Bell, Harry Weeks, Glyn Davis, Jennie Temple, Laura Guy, Kirsteen MacDonald, Catherine Street, Georgia Horgan, Angela Dimitrakaki, Angeliki Rousou, Fiona Anderson, Denisa Tomkova, Ben Nichols, Kirstie Skinner and guests including Petra Bauer, Katie Schwab and Akiko Kobayash.



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Captions

1 "Social Reproduction in Art, Life and Struggle" Reading Group #3 at Collective in the context of Georgia Horgan's exhibition *Machine Room* (2015) (<http://www.collectivegallery.net/archive/2015-georgia-horgan>)

2 *Home Works* 2015–2017, Konsthall C, Stockholm

3 'Manual Labours: The Complaining Body, What do you need in Order to Complain? Workshop exercise with University Workers, Northern England 2015

4 *The New Woman's Survival Catalog*, 1973 by Kristen Grimstad (Editor), Susan Rennie (Editor)

5 "Social Reproduction in Art, Life and Struggle" Reading Group #7. Sewing and Sex Work: Organising Labour at Collective with Petra Bauer. Organised by Frances Stacey. (2016)

6 House Warming Dinner *Home Works* 2015–2017, Konsthall C

7 "Social Reproduction in Art, Life and Struggle" Reading Group #6: "The man-made environment and the politics of communal living" at Fountainbridge Community 'Wikihouse' with Akiko Kobayash from Assemble Collective Self Build (<http://assemble-csb.co.uk/#>). Organised by Frances Stacey. (2016)

Notes

1 Hilary Robinson ed., *Feminism-Art-Theory* (John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, 2015) and (John Wiley & Sons, Oxford, 2001).

2 Hilary Robinson discusses these developments in greater detail in "Feminism Meets the Big Exhibition: 2005 onwards," *Anglo-Saxonica* Vol. 3 No. 6, 2013, pp. 129-152.

3 Angela Dimitrakaki and Larry Perry eds., *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions* (Liverpool University Press,

Liverpool, 2013).

4 See for example Jens Hoffmann and Maria Lind, "To Show or Not to Show." *Mousse Magazine* No. 31. Accessed 23.3.2015. <http://moussemagazine.it/articolo.mm?id=759>

5 Helen Molesworth, "House Work and Art Work," *October* Vol. 92, Spring 2000, p. 79.

6 Griselda Pollock, "Painting, Feminism, History," in *Destabilising Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates*, Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips, eds., Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992, pp. 138-176, p. 146.

7 Vesna Madžoski, *De Cvatoribvs: The Dialectics of Care and Confinement*, Atropos Press, New York and Dresden, 2013.

8 See Elizabeth MacGregor, "The Situation of Woman Curators" in *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies*, Katy Deepwell ed., Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1995, pp 70-75.

9 Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: The Commercialization of Human Feeling*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1983, p. 167.

10 Angela McRobbie, "Notes on the Prefect," *Australian Feminist Studies* Vol. 30, No. 83, 2015, pp. 3-20.

11 This phrase derives from the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott's influential theorisation of the "good-enough mother". D.W. Winnicott, *The Child, the Family, and the Outside World* Penguin, London, 1973.

12 See Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.

13 Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries*, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2011, p. 141.

14 Felicity Allen, paper given at KEYWORDS, Edinburgh College of Art, 8 March 2016. Quoted with kind permission of the author. For more information on the KEYWORDS project, see www.keywordscontemporary.com

15 Hester Eisenstein, *Feminism Seduced: How Global Elites Use Women's Labor Power and Ideas to Exploit the World*, Routledge, London, 2009.

16 Anon., "Academy Outrage," *The London Times*, 5 May 1914.

17 Helen Molesworth, "How To Install Art as a Feminist," in *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*, eds. Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2010, pp. 498-513, p. 499. Exhibition catalogue.

18 In 2015 this group collaborated on the *Now You Can Go* programme of events. Accessed 24.6.2016. [http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com/programme](http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com/)

19 Jo Freeman, "The Tyranny of Structurelessness," 1972. Accessed 22.03.2016. <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm>.

20 Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* Vol. XLIV, No. 1, September 2005, pp. 278–283.

21 For more on the historiographic turn, see Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2013.

22 Helena Reckitt, "To Make Time Appear," *Art Journal* Vol. 70, No. 3, Fall 2011, pp. 58-63, p. 60.

23 See, for example, the current series developed by the Arika collective entitled *Episodes*, which takes a deliberately episodic approach to artistic production. Accessed 25.03.2016. <http://arika.org.uk/>

24 Alison Mountz, Anne Bonds, Becky Mansfield, Jenna Loyd, Jennifer Hyndman, Margaret Walton-Roberts, Ranu Basu, Risa Whitson, Roberta Hawkins, Trina Hamilton, and Winifred Curran, "For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University," *ACME: An International E-Journal for Critical Geographies* Vol. 14, No. 4, 2015, pp. 1235-1259.

25 See www.economyexhibition.net and Dimitrakaki and Lloyd (eds.) *ECONOMY: Art, Production and the Subject in the 21st Century*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2015.

26 See www.gdr.cascoprojects.org. Accessed 27.03.2015.

27 See Helena Reckitt, "Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics," in *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, ed. Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, pp. 131-156.

28 Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialization of Public Art*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2014, p. 8.

29 *Re.act.feminism #2 - a performing archive* website. Accessed 25.03.2016. <http://www.reactfeminism.org/>

30 Elke Krasny, "Feminist Thought and Curating: On Method," In *On Curating*. Accessed 20.03.2016 www.on-curating.org/index.php/about.html#.VvhCnEtRduY

31 Deepwell also notes the institution's reliance on such individuals to introduce "ground-breaking" scholarship and the demand for creativity. Katy Deepwell, "Feminist Curatorial Strategies and Practices Since the 1970s," in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. Janet Marstine, John Wiley & Sons, Oxford, 2006, p. 65.

32 Alex Farquharson, "I Curate, You Curate, We Curate," *Art Monthly* 269, 2003, pp. 7-10.

33 Silvia Federici, "Revolution from Ground Zero: Revolution, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle," *Autonomedia* 2012, p. 2.

34 A. L. Steiner, Eve Fowler and Emily Roysdon discussing their 2007 *Shared Women* project, quoted in Reckitt "Forgotten Relations," p. 148.

35 See Meredith Brown, "'The Enemies of Women's Liberation in the Arts Will be Crushed': A.I.R. Gallery's Role in the American Feminist Art Movement," Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 2012. Accessed 22.3.2016. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/essay/meredith-brown>

36 Irit Rogoff, "Gossip as Testimony: A Post-modern Signature" [1995], in Amelia Jones ed., *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, Routledge, London, 2003: 268-276.

37 See for example Sara Ahmed, "Making Feminist Points," 11 September 2013. Accessed 27.03.2016. <http://feministkilljoys.com/2013/09/11/making-feminist-points/>

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www.manuallabours.co.uk

www.konsthallc.se

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