

CURATING in Feminist Thought

Elke Krasny, Lara Perry,
Dorothee Richter

Curators and their partners are working in a contested field, in which the meanings of institutions, their power structures and modes of participation can be debated and reshaped. The number and diversity of high-profile major museum exhibitions in the twenty-first century that have been devoted to the themes of feminist and women's art has attracted an unprecedented critical attention to the practice of feminist curation. The diversity of the ways in which feminism has been represented in curatorial projects—from *Womanhouse* (1972) to *Gender Battle* (2007)—is explored here most fully in the essays by Amelia Jones and Hilary Robinson, which identify the range of these projects and the various ways in which exhibitions have articulated feminist perspectives.

At the same time that the nature of the feminist exhibition has been subjected to growing historical and critical scrutiny, the rise of the identification of the exhibition with the *curator* as its author (instead of the museum or indeed the artist or artwork) invites us to expand our considerations of the nature of curatorial work, histories, and scholarship. The focus on the curator often generates an account that individualizes or personalizes the agency of curatorial work (see Buurman's essay in this volume on the equivocal conceptualisation of curatorial agency), a tendency which we have aimed to resist. Instead, we have proposed the curator as an agency within which the art world locates its work of recognizing, celebrating, validating, and rejecting, and one that is susceptible to a feminist analysis. It is important to see the curatorial function as part of a developing discursive formation, with its specific inclusions, exclusions in respect of race, class, and gender: "To think of institutions in terms of production (of work and discourse and political practice and solidarity) instead of representation would be, to my mind, a first feminist step". With this provocation the curator Ruth Noack invited us to rethink the nature of feminist critique of the museum, the gallery, the exhibition space.

We must thank our contributors for their illuminating contributions that have allowed us to develop a cogent and timely interrogation of curating in feminism. In recent years the production modus and the ideological load of curating has increasingly become identified with "the new economic conditions that require new contexts of collaboration and interaction" (Olga Fernandez), conditions which are identified with celebrity and authority as well as precarity and casualisation. These essays unpack the gendered nature of the power relations, effects, inconsistencies, and contradictions of curating in the present, and help us to rethink the role of the curator. We present this volume with the wish that the practice of curating itself becomes one that is generative of a more inclusive and just art world. Therefore, it could be speculated that the notion of "the curatorial" implies a prob-

lematic ennoblement of curating as a meaning-producing activity in a politically and ideologically contested field, as Dorothee Richter suggests.

The essays and interviews that are gathered here unravel many aspects of curatorial labour that work to produce, or counter, gender inequalities. As Amelia Jones observes here, curatorial labour is “driven by concepts of what is important, how and what to see, and what ends up being encountered in the space of the museum”. The work might then be considered (and critiqued) as the work of selection and exclusion; but one of the themes that emerges prominently in these essays is the importance of affirmation, attachment, and affiliation as modes by which feminist curators imagine their work. This theme is especially powerful in the essays by Lina Džuverović and Irene Revell, the essay on parafeminist parody by Laura Castagnani, Heike Munder’s account of the ‘girl’ energy traceable in certain popular forms of feminist art practice, and the interview between Gabrielle Moser and Helena Reckitt. These essays also specify theoretical models for the replacement of critical with affirmative feminist engagements, including Italian feminism of the 1970s; Catherine Grant’s article on ‘fans’ of feminism; and theorizations of ‘friendship’ or affectionate parody as the generative modes by which feminist curatorial work is performed.

That selection by affiliation is simultaneously a process of exclusion is raised by Helena Reckitt in her contribution, and also by Amelia Jones in the brief history of *Womanhouse* with which her article opens. Jones notes that women of colour were largely excluded from *Womanhouse*, which she explains was a consequence of the class/ race orientations of the university within which the project was formed. The absence, or problematic forms of inclusion, of women of colour within many curatorial and critical art ventures is an issue that has given many of us pause, and that as editors/organizers of this programme we have worked hard to avoid. Is it the case that the forms of feminism that operate in art history/theory continue to be incompatible with the feminist perspectives of women of colour? Is the art historical/curatorial concern with occupational achievement alienating to women of colour, who may neither value nor have meaningful access to the work? The issue of how to achieve equal and diverse representation that is implied in such questions is often sidestepped in these essays.

The reshaping of issues of representation within feminism is suggested by the presentation of *exclusion*—as a voluntary withdrawal—as a valid feminist strategy, as discussed for example by Moser and Reckitt in their account of the events programme of “Now You can Go”, held across sites in London in 2015, and its inspirations. Rather than aiming for equality of representation, many of the feminist curators and critics represented here are more concerned with resisting the ‘dominant drives’ of curating, which are connected with structures of domination (including colonisation). That these nameable dominant structures shape the work of feminists within conventional art institutions is a problem raised in several essays, including Sigrid Schade’s essay on biographical exhibitions, or Stella Rollig’s comment that “the game rules and compulsions imposed on the institution from outside” limit feminist agency in areas such as programming. On the other hand, the demand for an equality of representation is still held up by Dorothee Richter and Maura Reilly in their contributions, which present the inventory of equality as a temporary strategy, a support structure on the way to diversity and multiplicity beyond fixed categories as a horizon.

Examples of practices of resistance to the drives/structures of domination cited in these essays include eschewing the imperatives of curatorial discovery

(Džuverović and Revell); refusing the hierarchical pay structures that govern institutional work (Lloyd et al.); and avoiding the material structures of the museum (Krasny). Elke Krasny's essay highlights the dependence of conventional curatorial practices on the material and particularly the real estate or property resources that are commanded by the museum. The complex interrelationship between the significance of 'real' property in the art world (the 'buildings' of the museums and exhibition halls, the dealer-critic system that produces art objects as commodities,) and the unwaged and uncapitalised resource of 'immaterial' or 'social' labour is a recurrent theme in these texts. A newly revived gender analysis of the structural importance of a typically unwaged form of labour—the labour of social reproduction—to the curatorial role is central to many of the essays (Buurman, Reckitt, Perry, Lloyd et al., Krasny).

The relationship between the material and social status of artworks under the purview of curating is key to the question of how artworks and exhibitions themselves might resist dominant and dominating modes of curatorial work. The nature of the works exhibited and the mode of their display is gestured to in Buurman's discussion of the 'white cube' presentation at dOCUMENTA, and in Jones's call for a feminist curatorial project that addresses the ephemeral, the fragmentary, and the intimate forms of art production that have sustained feminist practice. That such accounts must be produced in relation to resistant forms of art historical and critical writing is argued by Jones, and by Džuverović and Revell in their advocacy of a feminist art history rendered as "a crumpled heap" rather than a series of examples. That feminist forms of curatorial, artistic, and historical/critical practice form a powerfully interconnected body of material from which to draw inspiration for feminist agency is certainly in evidence here.