

Feminist Subjects versus Feminist Effects: The Curating of Feminist Art (or is it the Feminist Curating of Art?)

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This paper sketches a schematic history of feminist curating and the curating of feminist or women's art in the North American and European contexts. My aim is to think about the dual projects of feminist curating—either curating from a feminist point of view or curating works of feminist or women's art (or both)—in order to cast light on what it means to evoke feminism in relation to the curatorial enterprise. Curating involves both working with archives and constructing histories; it involves looking at works of art and making choices about which to include; it 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.

Curating makes arguments about feminist art histories and strategies concrete; curating *constructs* certain kinds of historical narratives, or in some cases intervenes in existing narratives. As such, while scholarly histories and theories of feminist art and culture are crucial to the feminist projects of expanding histories as well as interrogating the structures through which art is made and historicized, *curatorial practice* is one of the most important sites for the constitution of both historical narratives about feminist art (the histories of feminist art) and feminist theories of curating and writing histories (the feminist histories and theories of art).

The joining of feminism and curating has a long history, at least since the beginning of the feminist art movement in the late 1960s in the US and UK (the dominant sites for the early articulation of the movement). In 2010, Bojana Pejić, assisted by a group of feminist art specialists from twenty-four countries, curated the 2009-10 exhibition *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* at the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna; in the program for the symposium relating to this show (also in 2010, in November), feminist curating is articulated as a "junction [...] between practice and theoretical thought, between powers of inscription and perception, between political agendas, discourses of the institutions and acts of critical 'resistant' reading." As well, the organizers raise the question of how "social, political and ideological contexts translate in the story (and space) of an art exhibition", and whether exhibitions "'inform,' 'mediate,' and 'represent' or, alongside artworks, [become] [...] battlegrounds [for] [...] agendas of sexual and gender difference."¹

I propose to explore these interrelated questions through a two-part inquiry, first sketching in brief form the interrelated histories of feminist curating and of the curating of feminist or women's art, and, second, exploring a small selection of practices that might, precisely by maintaining an openness to ever-shifting "agendas of sexual and gender difference", as the *Gender Check* curators put it, be impossible to "tame" fully through curatorial practice. These untameable practices tend to be community-based, often performative, and activist; they tend to perform or evoke the female sex in ways that are provocative, ephemeral, haptic, and/or have otherwise not been embraced by exhibitionary strategies. While this kind of feminist practice is not always excluded from feminist scholarship on the visual arts, the works it generates cannot be incorporated into exhibitions in any simple way. When they are on rare occasion included, they still arguably challenge attempts to tame them: to "curate" them into proper museum spaces and to "organize" them into seamless narratives of art historical progress.

Feminist Exhibitions, A Brief and Singular History, focusing on Los Angeles

One of the key issues for the nascent feminist art movement in the late 1960s, particularly in the US and UK, was the exclusion of women's artistic work from exhibitions of modern and contemporary art. To that end, it is not surprising that one of the key motivations was to redress this situation, either (more commonly) by founding feminist art venues independent of the dominant cultural and funding situations or by developing exhibitions of women's art in mainstream institutions. Two major examples will suffice to sketch this early period here: the establishment of a series of alternative spaces in Los Angeles that were aimed at developing both a separate *feminist pedagogy* and a separate *site for the presentation of feminist art and performance*; and the first major exhibition organized for a mainstream art museum, Linda Nochlin and Linda Sutherland Harris's 1976 exhibition, commissioned by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), *Women Artists: 1550 to 1950*.

A small number of excellent histories have been published on the Los Angeles-area feminist art movement, from Judy Chicago's 1975 autobiography, *Through the Flower*, to Terry Wolverton's 2002 *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building* to recent exhibition catalogues by Laura Meyer.² This is a complex and vast history, but the key notes to strike here are the founding of the Feminist Art Program at California State College Fresno (now California State University Fresno) in 1970 by Judy Chicago (with the help of graduate students Faith Wilding and Suzanne Lacy), its move to California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in 1971, where Miriam Schapiro joined forces with Chicago for the final year of the programme, culminating in the 1972 project *Womanhouse*, reported on widely across the United States, including in high-circulation mass media magazines such as *Time*.

The deeply radical nature of the feminist art programme and of *Womanhouse* was in its *combination of pedagogy and practice*: Chicago in particular aimed to *empower* women both by encouraging them to mould their "personal" stories into "political" feminist art and performance, and by teaching them how to make things, build things, and generally assert themselves in the public realm of the art school and the city as a whole.³ With *Womanhouse*—a tour de force of feminist curating-as-pedagogy—Chicago and Schapiro thus worked with the Feminist Art Program students to gain the range of carpentry and other hands-on skills necessary to renovate a derelict house near downtown LA, and then to fill the rooms of the house with feminist performance and art installations open to the public. Each installation provided feminist commentary on various aspects of domestic space—such as Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgett, and Robin Weltsch's "nurturant kitchen" with

its egg-breasts covering the walls and ceiling, Sandy Orgel's "linen closet", with its spatial literalization of a young woman being trapped in social expectations, Wilding's "womb room", and Chicago's "menstruation bathroom".

The *activation* of female experience through the body was a key element of the broader strategy developed within the Feminist Art Program—thus key feminist performances took place at *Womanhouse*, such as Faith Wilding's *Waiting*, in which she rocked back and forth in front of an audience, reciting the litany of events women have to "wait" for in their position as passive members of family and society, Chris Rush's piece *Scrubbing* and Sandra Orgel's *Ironing*, commenting on women's work, and Karen LeCocq and Leah Youdelman's performance and installation *Léa's Room*, an exploration of oppressive ideals of female beauty. The concept of performance as activating women's experiences in the public arena—experiences that had long been seen as "private", "domestic", and thus as "unimportant" to the larger political scene—was a key aspect of early feminist art and exhibition practices. These concepts were carried through with the founding of the Woman's Building, which was a key cultural centre from 1973 to 1991, in downtown Los Angeles.

The Woman's Building was imagined to include the flagship program of the Feminist Studio Workshop, co-founded (after the Feminist Art Program at CalArts ended) by Judy Chicago, designer Sheila de Bretteville, and art historian Arlene Raven, as well as potentially exhibition spaces, theatre companies, a feminist bookstore, and other feminist organizations.⁴ The Woman's Building was by no means the only alternative feminist art space in Los Angeles. Womanspace Gallery, for example, was another alternative feminist gallery founded in 1972; and other alternative exhibition venues founded in LA in the early to late 1970s, from Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art to Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, also hosted feminist events.

This network of spaces provided both "separatist" and mixed sites for the display and performance of feminist art. As feminist art historian Ruth Iskin, who was active in LA at the time, noted, Womanspace (like the Woman's Building) aimed to provide an alternative to the "dealer-critic system" dominated by male artists, patrons, curators, and critics through the establishment of alternative feminist galleries and systems of critical and historical analysis.⁵ The separatist feminist sites were founded with radical political motivations and yet were in some ways limited in their demographic—being dominated by white middle-class (although not always heterosexual) women and so inevitably by their interests. This is so in spite of the fact that members of *Womanhouse* such as Iskin (an Israeli-born lesbian feminist) noted the crucial importance of not only supporting "women" artists per se but for this feminist goal to encompass an anti-racist and queer agenda: "For feminist art and feminist revolution to take priority [...], the exhibitions should give maximum exposure to female artists [...], and to provide special opportunities for visibility to minority groups within the female community (such as the *Black Women's Show* and the *Gay Week*)."⁶

Many Latino and Black women artists in LA in particular have felt that this gesture of inclusion was not fully successful. Black feminist artist Senga Nengudi, active in LA in the 1970s and 1980s, thus noted recently to me that, unlike the Latino community's efforts to include Black artists such as herself, and the Black Art Movement's embrace of her artistic work, "The [white dominated Los Angeles] feminist movement was a WHOLE other story. Don't get me started! We were included in as a necessity. I hardly felt like an equal partner. Although I did sit on a couple of Women's Building committees, it never felt quite like home in the [1970s]."⁷

I bring up Senga Nengudi (not to mention Judy Baca, Betye Saar, and numerous other women of colour practicing in LA at the time, who might on occasion have had work included in Woman's Building activities, but never felt fully embraced), because it is important to note the exclusions within feminist exhibition practices even in the most successful radical moments of establishing a feminist alternative to mainstream institutions. Also, the Los Angeles case makes very clear, I hope, the crucial interrelationships among pedagogy, art-making and performance, critical writing about art (by scholars and art critics such as Iskin and her partner Arlene Raven), and exhibition practices. To some degree, the exclusions even within these radical feminist venues in LA was due in part to their roots in pedagogy, since art schools such as California Institute of the Arts were hardly encouraging Black and Latina and/or working class women to apply.

The second example of historical feminist curatorial practice, briefly, is the organisation by art historians Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris in a mainstream venue—the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—of the major exhibition, *Women Artists: 1550 to 1950*. Described generally as the “first” exhibition of women artists in history (obviously within the Western context), the *Women Artists* show expanded on Nochlin's now famous arguments in her 1971 essay, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”, where she rejects both the feminist strategy of simply trying to redress the exclusion of art history by recuperating lost women artists for a new canon, and the strategy (exemplified in Chicago's pedagogy and artwork) of promoting a particular “female experience” as defining women's art in different terms from men's.⁸ Nochlin argues, controversially, “that there have been no supremely great women artists, as far as we know, although there have been many interesting and very good ones who remain insufficiently investigated or appreciated.”⁹ Nochlin and Sutherland-Harris continue along this line in the catalogue, asserting that an approach to feminist curating that involves simply inserting the work of historical women artists into un-touched canonical frameworks is “ultimately self-defeating, for it fixes women within preexisting structures without questioning the validity of these structures”; through such misbegotten methods, they argue, feminism “has come dangerously close to creating its own canon.”¹⁰

As already suggested, by the mid to late 1970s across Los Angeles, young feminist artists and teachers were developing entirely new *institutions* to articulate new modes of thinking, making, displaying, and teaching art and performance. At the same time, even large and relatively entrenched institutions such as Los Angeles County Museum of Art were not just accepting but *commissioning* a major exhibition on women's art in history: notably, Sutherland Harris was recruited in 1971 by LACMA director Kenneth Donahue to organize *Women Artists*. Donahue had been approached by a group of activist women artists in LA who demanded “gallery space and exhibition time for women equal to that being given to male artists.”¹¹ Here, the impact of the growing pedagogical and curatorial efforts on the part of Chicago and her students can clearly be seen as having a direct impact on the programming of a major art institution (guided by a brave and enlightened older white man—Donahue was in his late 50s!¹²). Los Angeles, of course, was not typical in the US at the time, and other major cities were not hosting major feminist art shows nor were broad-based initiatives in feminist art pedagogy developing elsewhere in the US or Europe to such a degree.

I hope this brief history brings to life at least in a partial way a very small part of a huge history of feminist curating in the early stages of the feminist art movement, with Los Angeles being both exemplary but to some degree unique in the

intensity and wide-ranging success of its sudden immersion in feminist art initiatives.¹³ This brief history points to the motivations behind such curatorial efforts, and the deep connections between feminist curating and pedagogy and art history. It points to the exclusions within mainstream institutions and discourses that feminists were fighting against, as well as to the inevitable exclusions *within* the very venues feminists established—limitations often due to frictions among the diverse communities of women working in the arts in cities with complex demographics such as Los Angeles.

1980-1990: A “Lack” of Feminist Shows

After the 1970s, aside from a very few exceptions, such as the important 1984 exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum in New York, organized by Kate Linker and Jane Weinstock, there were no large-scale feminist art exhibitions in the 1980s in the US or, to my knowledge, in Europe. *Difference*, however, was a major show with a profound influence; the exhibition, which gave a particular kind of avant-gardist feminist art and theory (informed by poststructuralist, Marxist, and psychoanalytical methods) credibility, helped open the commercial US art market (based in New York at the time) to feminist artists such as Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, and Sherrie Levine for the first time (the signing of Kruger by the highly successful Mary Boone Gallery in the mid 1980s was a dramatic sign of the perceived commercial viability of feminist art by that time, due in part to exhibitions such as *Difference*).

In the 1990s there was still a paucity of feminist curatorial work in major institutions. There were only a handful of exhibitions of feminist art (or feminist exhibitions, curated from a feminist point of view) across the Anglophone art world, the US and the UK still being the dominant sites for the feminist art movement and for feminist exhibition practices.¹⁴ However, in the early 1990s a spate of exhibitions in New York, Los Angeles, Glasgow, and London (the former two of these curatorially linked) entitled *Bad Girls* signalled a return to feminism, but through a lens coloured heavily by trends in popular culture—in particular the rise of pop stars such as Madonna and Cyndi Lauper—and by the larger backlash against feminism in mainstream media across the US, as identified by Susan Faludi in her 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*.¹⁵

The *Bad Girls* shows foregrounded the work of artists such as Nicole Eisenman, Sue Williams, Dorothy Cross, and Sarah Lucas—work that explicitly refused the niceties of a feminism that recuperated “positive images” of women such as the goddess imagery of the early 1970s, promoted “central core” imagery (such as Wilding’s *Womb*), as well as the avant-gardist strategies of feminist artists promoted in the 1980s such as Kruger – in favour of provoking the viewer through nasty, aggressive pictures and installations promoting female sexual empowerment. Lucas’s provocative 1997 *Bunny Gets Snookered* thus presents a bawdy and slightly creepy image of a female form in a chair with her legs spread, but the “woman” seems to be fabricated from stuffed tights and clothing, her crotch disturbingly gaping yet closed off (literally sealed) and unavailable.

While the curators (particularly of the British versions) included work by artists identified with a “working-class aesthetic” in the UK (including Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas), the *Bad Girls* shows on the whole were still almost entirely white—representing a continuing tendency to conceive of feminist issues in the visual arts as exclusively the concern of white women.¹⁶ Also, they were not historical shows but exhibited work from the late 1980s and early 1990s—a period notably marked by a dearth of large-scale exhibitions exploring the *histories* of feminist art (although

Division of Labor: "Women's Work" in Contemporary Art, at the Bronx Museum in 1995, included some historical feminist work from the 1970s).¹⁷ It was only in 1996 that two major feminist shows emerged internationally that addressed and presented feminist art, one explicitly historical and one only obliquely (or ineffectively, depending on one's point of view).

I organized in 1996 at the UCLA/Hammer Museum of Art, *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*. Given the mandate to show Judy Chicago's large-scale feminist installation piece, the 1979 *Dinner Party*, I organized *Sexual Politics* around a progression of feminist art debates which had crystallized around Chicago's practice. While many feminists from London and New York had decried Chicago's "essentialism", her projects drew vast popular audiences—one of the many contradictions I hoped to point to in my essays in the catalogue and through exhibiting a broad choice of other types of feminist art in the show addressing a range of topics of debate from "cunt art" to "bodily functions", "politicizing the domestic sphere", "diversity" within feminism, and "intimacy and autobiography".¹⁸

Here, rather than analyzing my own exhibition anew, it is worth quoting at length from an interview Angela Dimitrakaki completed with me and published in 2013 in her volume *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, co-edited with Lara Perry. While I have mixed feelings about the effectiveness of *Sexual Politics* (which, as many critics argued at the time, ended up being perceived too much as a "Judy Chicago" show), Dimitrakaki has an extremely and intelligent view of the show and we debated its merits as follows.

Dimitrakaki introduces our interview by noting the following:

One of the reasons that *Sexual Politics* remains a distinctive intervention is that it negotiated a particular structure for showcasing both feminist work and the complex processes through which art is associated with political discourse—here feminism. As a curatorial experiment, the exhibition assumed the structure of a critical essay: it did not just focus on artists or art but on providing a context. The context provided focused on the terms in which an iconic yet controversial artwork, namely Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1973-9), could be seen to be part of feminist politics as a terrain of a complex and evolving ideological struggle [...]. / The exhibition and its accompanying publication proved to be a critical exercise on how to narrate an *art-work's political history* through research and display [...].

She also noted, in an earlier manuscript version of this text, in comments that did not fully make the final publication:

Arguably, [in this way] *Sexual Politics* proposed a model of curatorial work whereby the curatorial gesture is concerned with histories to come rather than just exploring those already in place (which the show and book also did, functioning to an extent as a document) ... *The Dinner Party* did not just belong to a feminist past; in the 1990s it could also be deployed in the context of strategic thinking about the present and future of feminism in the arts.¹⁹

I followed up on her generous (and to my mind exactly right) comments by stressing my desire to use the piece as a "pivot" through which to explore conflicts and debated terms in feminism and beyond. To my knowledge, my strategy of using curating to make a political and historical proposition about feminist legacies remains unique. What failed about this strategy was clearly the very thing I had

hoped would innovate how we organize feminist histories—the use of one artist’s work as a pivot. The show was criticized roundly by conservatives and feminists alike for wrongly featuring Chicago, already a divisive figure in the feminist art movement due to her grand ambitions and tendency to make use of the labour of many other artists and artisans (albeit, all scrupulously credited in the text panels displayed with *The Dinner Party*).

Another large and important feminist show that same year was often cited by feminist critics and historians such as Griselda Pollock as the pinnacle of feminist curatorial practice: *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the Feminine*, which was organized by Catherine de Zegher initially for the Beguinage of Saint-Elizabeth in Kortrijk, Belgium, in 1994-5 and expanded for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston in 1996; it also travelled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., and the Whitechapel Art Gallery in London. *Inside the Visible* included work from the 1930s up to the 1990s, brought together under “elliptical” arguments focusing on the works’ shared experiential “femininity”, but did not offer a historical framework in which to understand the very different premises and motivations and contexts of artists as diverse as, for example, Claude Cahun, Charlotte Solomon, and Mona Hatoum.

In spite of its largely positive reception and continued reputation in feminist art history and curatorial studies as the epitome of a certain kind of theoretically rigorous feminist curatorial practice, then, the show and catalogue were and are 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 (or to *history tout court*). Furthermore, while distancing itself from “essentializing” approaches to feminist art, eschewing even the terms “feminism”, “women”, “gender”, or “sexuality” in the title, the show was ultimately based on similar bases to those of any feminist exhibition—for what brings together such disparate artists across time and space other than an assumption that they are joined by what 1970s feminists might have called their “women’s experience”? It is not enough to avoid such a term by substituting for it, as de Zegher does, “the feminine” or the trendy notion, drawn from feminist artist and theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, of the “matrixial”.²⁰

Exhibitions of Historical Feminist or Genderqueer Art, c. 2005-2009

If Dimitrakaki’s assessment, and my comparison of *Sexual Politics* and *Inside the Visible*, provide a compelling basis for future evaluations of effective *historical* exhibitions of feminist art, perhaps *Sexual Politics* can be viewed as an important precedent for the spate of exhibitions addressing the *histories* of feminist art that emerged from 2005 through 2009 in venues across Europe and North America.²¹ These shows were paralleled by a burgeoning interest in feminist art in Europe and North America, testified by the publication of numerous articles in the popular and art press and special issues of art magazines on feminism published during this period.²² Academic feminist art history and theory were, for this brief moment, actively revived as crucial discourses, signalled as well by a range of major conferences that have addressed feminist art histories and theories in South Africa, Los Angeles, New York, and Stockholm.²³

Here, just a few very brief comments on six of these shows will be revealing in terms of the tension between exhibitions of art deemed to be feminist and exhibitions curated from a feminist point of view.

***Gender Battle: The Impact of Feminism in the Art of the 1970s*, curated by Juan Vicente Aliaga for the Contemporary Art Centre of Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, in 2007**

Gender Battle incisively addressed the issue of *gender critique*, clearly beginning from a politically feminist point of view, rather than proposing a strictly “feminist” approach or a strictly “feminist” range of artworks, but it also directly credited feminist discourse for a broad range of works addressing gender and sexuality and critiquing what he calls in the Press Release the “macho patriarchal society” of the 1970s. Aliaga continues in the release: “This project attempts to examine feminism’s contributions, during the seventies, brought to light and served as a platform to launch a series of approaches, without which it would be impossible to understand the present.”²⁴ This approach enabled Aliaga to include but also expand beyond classic feminist works such as Carolee Schneemann’s body-oriented pieces, to show works by lesser-known (at least to a US audience) artists such as German performative photographer Jürgen Klauke. In the end, this show was both political (pointing to key issues in feminism and the impact of the feminist critique on women and men artists) and historical (raising our consciousness of lesser known works that preceded, say, the work of Cindy Sherman).

***elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle*, curated by Camille Morineau. Originated in Paris at the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, 2009-11; travelled to Seattle Art Museum in reduced form in 2012-13.**

Camille Morineau, then staff curator at the Centre Pompidou, spent years proposing a thematic feminist exhibition at the Pompidou and was in the end only able to organize *elles@centrepompidou*, a show that is surreptitiously feminist (all of the work in the show made after 1960 is deeply informed by feminism, if not explicitly in all cases feminist).²⁵ The anxiety over feminism is indicated in the Preface to the catalogue by Alfred Pacquement, then director of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, who notes that the plethora of important works by women in their permanent collections signals “a possible development of a history of art in the feminine”, only to backtrack: “it is [now] possible to unfold a full and entire history of art with ‘elles.’ A history about which there is *nothing feminine at all* [my emphasis]”.²⁶

Regardless of the director’s apparent anxiety about “the feminine” and his reduction of radical feminist work to feminine qualities, the show presented one of the best collections of art that was either explicitly feminist or deeply informed by feminism, mostly from the US and Western Europe. However, the exhibition also (due to the constraints noted) begged some questions about whether one can make a political point about feminist issues in such a context, including both explicitly feminist work and work by artists bent on actively disavowing the importance of feminism such as Marina Abramović. Still, given the limitations of what Morineau could do, the show was a fantastic argument in favour of continuing to mount shows of “women’s art”. The smash success of the exhibition, which was extended far beyond its initially scheduled run into 2011 because of its popularity, proved that, while large art institutions are still highly conservative and entrenched (viz., Pacquement’s hedging remarks), the general public was ready for feminist art; art presenting explicitly feminist forms, such as the radical erotic photographs of Alina Szapoznikow, was clearly of huge interest to the general public in France, as well as in Seattle where the show travelled in 2012–13.

Love and Democracy, organized by Pawel Leszkowicz in Poznan and Gdansk, 2005-6

In this context, the important work being done by Pawel Leszkowicz organizing exhibitions of queer art in Poland must be noted: Leszkowicz honours feminism and queer politics by assertively organizing shows that directly challenge the growing reactionism of the Polish state. His two-part 2005-6 exhibition *Love and Democracy* in Poznan and Gdansk, with its accompanying catalogue (co-authored by his partner, the cultural studies scholar Tomasz Kitlinski), *Love and Democracy: Reflections on the Homosexual Question in Poland*, were, on the one hand, necessarily essentializing, as is arguably required in order to make a space for feminist, gay, and lesbian culture in an increasingly conservative Poland: there is little room for nuance when you are fighting for the right to debate and exhibit feminist and queer art and theory. The exhibition and catalogue, on the other hand, together provide a radically open-minded concept of the interrelatedness of queer and feminist art and theory—de-essentialized in their refusal to assume, for example, queer feminist art can only be made by women; in this way, they also expand in a crucial context the loosely feminist and queer approach to curating that I am addressing here.²⁷

Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Connie Butler for the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007; travelled to the National Museum of Women in the Arts (2007), PS1/Museum of Modern Art, New York (2008), and the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia (2008-9)

Global Feminisms, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin for the Brooklyn Museum of Art, Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art, 2007; travelled to Davis Museum and Cultural Center, Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts, USA (2008)

Two major US shows have dominated debates about feminist curating in the US for the past decade: the 2007 exhibitions *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, curated by Connie Butler originally for a Los Angeles debut at the Museum of Contemporary Art (and traveling to PS1 in New York in 2008), and *Global Feminisms*, organized by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin for the Elizabeth Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York. These exhibitions have received a lot of press. Suffice it to say here, *Wack!* was the first major institutional show presenting *historical* feminist art since my show *Sexual Politics* in 1996, and even included an work by less well-known feminist artists such as Senga Nengudi—but the exhibition itself lacked any historical contextualization, going so far as to show work such as Nengudi's and Suzanne Lacy and Leslie Labowicz's important activist performances (via documentary photographs) with no information about where these pieces were made, took place, or how they were originally contextualized. *Wack!* thus simultaneously *presented* a historical and geographical range of feminist work (all by women) and *erased* the political and cultural specificity of each practice.²⁸

Alternatively, *Global Feminisms* presented very recent art by women (whether all explicitly feminist is up to debate—see Wangechi Mutu for example) from a broad, global context (although, perhaps inevitably, given that feminism is a “Western” discourse for the most part, many of the artists from other parts of the world are currently living in Europe or North America and thus potentially engaging more directly with art-world feminism). The catalogue included important essays correcting the erasure of non-European and non-American art from histories of feminist art—the exhibition included works from India, Japan, Korea, Central America, and other places usually invisible in Western-oriented feminist art exhibitions and histories. The question of whether including a broader range of art by women implicitly essentializes (for example, avoiding the question of whether an artist such as Mutu

produces feminist work or considers herself feminist) is begged in interesting and productive ways by *Global Feminisms*.

***Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe, 2009-10*; curated by Bojana Pejić with consultants from twenty-four countries across Eastern Europe. Initiated at the MUMOK (Museum of Modern Art) Vienna in 2010; travelled to Zachęta, Warsaw.²⁹**

Gender Check, a show I did not see, focussed on “gender in the art and social history of Eastern and Southeastern Europe” and thus, it seems to me, followed on the illustrious heels of *Gender Battle* in rightly opening up what we might think of as “gender-critical” art practice within a very specific context—in this case pre- and post-Soviet bloc countries. As Pejić put it in a 2010 interview with Hedvig Turai, she was motivated by the exclusion of issues of gender and sexuality in studies of art from this part of the world and aimed to deploy a Foucauldian framework to explore gender as a *relation of power* within socialist state politics.³⁰ In this sense I would argue that her curatorial strategy is exemplary of the kind of feminist curatorial strategy that is essential in locating and maintaining the relevance (even urgency) of feminism today. Like Aliaga, then, Pejić applies “gender check” as an art historical “method” or “operation” in order to broaden the understanding of gender critique to point to its interrelationship with issues of sexuality, masculinity, and class. Hence the inclusion of works such as Vlad Mamyshev-Monroe’s performance of himself as Marilyn Monroe in a section dedicated to the “Heroic Male Subject”—exemplifying vulnerability in the face of the general tendency of masculinity to subordinate to power, a notion with particular relevance in the context of socialist Eastern European cultures; the show thus presented obviously feminist work by women but also works by men that, as Pejić describes to Turai, foregrounded male vulnerability.³¹

This huge and rich range of shows curated from a feminist point of view all highlight power relations as these relate to gendered and sexed bodies and subjects. What they do not do is question the limits of large object-based shows. For the remainder of this paper, I want to address one final show in relation to the question of renegade artworks or practices that refuse the kind of narratives about sexual and gender identification that tend to be sketched whether directly (as in historical shows such as *Sexual Politics*) or indirectly (with most of the other shows noted above) in curating relating to feminist or women’s art.

Coda: Contentious Body Works / Contentious Histories

A big media splash accompanied the opening of the Spring 2016 inaugural exhibition at the new Hauser Wirth & Schimmel in Los Angeles—*Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947-2016*. Co-curated by Paul Schimmel and Jenni Sorkin, the show is presented as a “thematic historical survey that is international in scope and fundamentally revisionist, making women artists central to the history of sculpture by tracing the legacy of studio-based organic abstraction.”³² The title of the exhibition, which includes almost 100 works by 34 women artists, does not include the word feminism—rather, the focus is on “sculpture by women”, along with the frisson created by this unlikely combination (given the long history of masculinist values attached to sculpture in particular among the arts). When a major commercial gallery sees fit to promote its interests by hosting a show that is marketed as “revisionist” and is thus implicitly feminist show as its inaugural event, we know feminist curating (and feminist modes of writing history, as indicated in the text noted above) have become not only acceptable but trendy—as long as they don’t announce themselves as feminist.

After decades of studied neglect on the part of galleries, museums, and the art market in general, all of this renewed interest in feminist art – both historical and contemporary—makes me nervous. Among other things, I'm very worried about *what kinds* of feminist art (or arguably, as in the case of *Global Feminisms* or *Revolution in the Making*, art by women) are being marketed and what kinds are being left out—surely it's no accident, for example, that the messy activism-driven or overtly sexualized, queer, and/or raced feminist practices tend to be excluded from these exhibitions as these are not as “exhibition-friendly”, not as easily marketable as certain varieties of photographic or object-based practices. Sculpture, after all, is imminently marketable and apparently about 30% of the works in *Revolution in the Making* are for sale. Excluded, still, from such blockbuster shows is more difficult work addressing serious political issues on the ground that are affecting women in violently negative ways. Or work taking more oblique, quiet, or non-marketable forms that might be accessible only through another kind of research practice.

Coming to an ending here, then, I want to explore a particular feminist art practice from 1960s Los Angeles that has not made it into the major histories or exhibitions of feminist art. If we could say that feminist artists have, since the mid-1960s, consistently and explicitly worked to explore what it means to identify as “women” (Simone de Beauvoir's question of “becoming woman”) or to examine how power accrues along lines relating to perceived gender identifications, then this practice exemplifies a strategy of interrogating the links between one's perceived bodily identification (via the visual field) and one's voice in the public sphere in ways that are deeply threatening even to feminist frameworks—that in fact I myself found too messy and confusing to include in *Sexual Politics*, where I was intent on sketching a history of feminist ideas and practices relating to the visual arts. Enacting the “becoming-ness” of femininity—the way in which, as Simone de Beauvoir argued, it is never “essentially” fixed or static—the argument might go, feminist artists can both denaturalize gender (marking it as performative) and assertively activate the feminine body—a body that had previously been, in the logic of Western thought (as Beauvoir theorizes), rendered inactive, consigned to “immanence” and thus to “otherness”, maintaining the inequities of patriarchy.³³

In the mid 1960s, Barbara Smith, then more or less a housewife and mother living in the Los Angeles area, rented an early (and very bulky) Xerox machine, photocopied her cunt, breasts, and body, and made a series of albums of these ghostly indexical impressions of her body. Like other amazingly prescient proto-feminist works from the early and mid 1960s—such as Carolee Schneemann's 1963 performance *Eye Body*—Smith's Xeroxes were ahead of their time. Born in 1931, Smith studied painting and art history in the early 1950s and continued to paint while raising children; she became a professional artist only in her 30s. Not only did Smith break free from her middle-class role as a housewife to imagine renting a Xerox machine in one of its earliest manifestations, to explore the capacity of this type of indexical rendering of the body; she also mobilized this technology to explore the very *unseen* aspects of female embodiment (or at least unseen within the purview of the art world—in pornography of course the female sex is persistently rendered, though in ways that tend to depersonalize the bodies attached to it).

Smith's images are collected into scrapbooks that she squirreled away in her modest house in Venice, California; this is important performative work that I saw only because I was interviewing her in 2009 for a research project on LA performance. These intimate scrapbooked pictures are enigmatic and indexical marks of a

young woman finding her way out of a suburban lifestyle of wife and mother into the role of radical body artist—scrimping together all of her savings to rent what at the time was a hugely expensive early photocopier in order to register her own embodiment in the ghostly traces of toner it produces so easily. Palimpsests of embodiment—they read forty-five years later (held in my hands sitting on her couch while interviewing her at her home) as gorgeous fleshy layered pages of promised interiors.³⁴ As Smith pointed out to me, the Xerox is technologically unique as a medium—it works by impressing paper with beads of plastic that mimic, in the density through which the machine deposits them on the page, the lights and darks of whatever forms or images were placed on top of the horizontal screen; the Xeroxes of Smith's cunt, which looks tender and beckoning, like flowers pressed and dried in the pages of a dictionary, are technically then as indexical as an analogue photograph—the lights and darks materially mimic the lights and darks of the "original" form. I feel this, with a sense of haunting, as I hold these fragile fading books—each page of cunt, a hole in their logic of wholeness—in my hands.

Without art historical or curatorial interventions such as this, such work might "disappear" historically. Hence the political urgency of rethinking how we research and what we show in major feminist exhibitions. If it weren't for such intimacies—moments of fortuitous scholarly curiosity become friendship—such works would remain unknown forever. Smith is not a self-promoter. It was only a passing reference she made in our interview—and the lucky fact that she had the albums right there in a bureau, rather than in her studio or rented storage—that enabled me to re-discover these amazing works. Such are in some cases the vicissitudes of history (and feminist curating!).

The point I am making here with this example of work by Barbara Smith, in terms of feminist curating, is that *this* kind of work is rarely deeply researched—or even known; what tends to happen in organizing shows about feminist art, or shows taking a wider purview and exploring contemporary art and issues of gender and sexuality, is that feminist strategies get pinpointed and defined often via previous publications and exhibitions—leaving out work that might have *feminist effects* or that might have been articulated in messy and open-ended ways that don't fit such definitions. These are works that might be performative and not quite coherent "objects"; they are often explicitly activist and intertwined with larger urban and visual and performance art contexts, as well as (in both cases) with alternative arts venues that do not always lend themselves to easy historicization.

To some degree, curating necessitates definitions and the exhibition of "things" that can be put in place, grasped, and understood—requiring a certain element of what Gayatri Spivak would call "strategic essentialism" in identifying "feminist art", and "feminist artists".³⁵ I would argue, however, that the most effective curatorial work keeps a balance between a political sharpness (underlaid by a deep commitment to theory and philosophies of gender and sexuality and, as such, a strategic essentialism) and a curiosity about what feminist practices might *not* be so well known, entailing that the curator both acknowledge the importance of defining terms and political locations (of feminism, for example) while remaining open to unexpected cultural productions that might promote feminist interests while not being so obviously part of feminist histories and institutions. It is in the spirit of this idea of keeping the tension between feminist subjects and feminist effects that I offer the arguments in this paper.

Notes

1 From the program released by the organizers of the November 2010 conference at the MUMOK (Museum of Modern Art) in Vienna, in conjunction with the exhibition *Gender Check*. I participated in this event and this document was sent to me.

2 Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist*, Doubleday, New York, 1975; Terry Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse: Life and Art at the Woman's Building*, City Lights, San Francisco, 2002; and Laura Meyer, *A Studio of their Own: The Legacy of the Fresno Feminist Experiment*, California State University, Art Gallery, Fresno, 2009. See also Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artist's Movement Southern California 1970-1976*, Double X, Santa Monica, 1977; Moira Roth, *Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in the 70s*, Astro Artz, Los Angeles, 1984.

3 Chicago, chapter four "Fresno and the Women's Program," *Through the Flower*, 70-92.

4 See Wolverton, *Insurgent Muse*; and Laura Meyer, "The Los Angeles Woman's Building and the Feminist Art Community, 1973-1991," in *The Sons and Daughters of Los: Culture and Community in LA*, David E. James, ed., Temple U Press, Philadelphia, 2003, pp. 39-62.

5 Iskin, "A Space of Our Own, Its Meanings and Implications," *WOMANS-SPACE Journal* 1, n. 1 (February/March 1973), p. 9. Interestingly, Iskin also connects this initiative to feminist art theory and art history, noting: "In order to preserve the notion of a modernist mainstream it is necessary to categorize as peripheral and minor any art that does not address itself solely and primarily to the set of issues to which the modernist line is dedicated. It is for this reason that the art of the best women artists has been categorized as minor, when addressing itself to uniquely female subject matter. Therefore, it is the task of the feminist theoretician to explicate feminist art on its own terms, with a new set of independent criteria," *Ibid.*, p. 9.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Senga Nengudi interview with Amelia Jones October 2009; transcript available in Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions archive.

8 See Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?," *ARTnews* (January 1971). Available online at: <http://www.artnews.com/2015/05/30/why-have-there-been-no-great-women-artists/>. Accessed 18.03.2016.

9 *Ibid.*

10 Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris, from the introduction to *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles; Random House, New York, 1976, p. 327; as quoted in Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Patricia Mathews, "The Feminist Critique of Art History," *Art Bulletin* 69, n. 3 (Sept. 1987), pp. 326-357.

11 Sutherland Harris describes meeting Donohue at a conference *Caravaggio and His Followers* held at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1971; during the course of related meetings, as Sutherland Harris narrates, Donohue noted to her that he had been approached by a group of women artists at LACMA who demanded "gallery space and exhibition time for women equal to that being given to male artists." See Sutherland Harris, "Acknowledgments," *Women Artists 1550-1950*, p. 8.

12 Donohue, born in 1915, the second director of LACMA and a specialist in Italian art, does not seem the obvious candidate for promoting the first exhibition of women's art (see "Donahue, [John] Kenneth," biographical entry in *Dictionary of Art Historians*; available online at: <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/donahuek.htm>. Accessed 18.03.2016).

13 See also the *At Home* exhibition at Long Beach Museum of Art, curated by Arlene Raven in homage to Woman's Building on the occasion of its tenth

anniversary See the catalogue, *At Home*, Arlene Raven, Long Beach Museum of Art, 1983.

14 *Difference* travelled to the Renaissance Society, Chicago, and to ICA London in 1984-5; it was accompanied by an important catalogue, *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality*, including now classic essays by Kate Linker, Craig Owens, Lisa Tickner, Jacqueline Rose, Peter Wollen, Jane Weinstock, Marcia Tucker, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York, 1984.

15 These shows included the 1993 *Bad Girls* exhibition co-sponsored by the Institute of Contemporary Art, London and the Contemporary Arts Centre, Glasgow and the *Bad Girls* exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York and its "sister" show with the same title at the Wight Art Gallery, UCLA, in 1994. Susan Faludi in her book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, Crown Publishing, New York, 1991.

16 On the "working class aesthetic" in British feminist art, see Laura Bedford Turner, "Tracey Emin, Sarah Lucas & Rachael Whiteread: Did feminism feature as a part of Young British Art?," *Chalk: University of Sussex Arts Society Journal* (April 19, 2012). Accessed March 18, 2016. <https://chalkjournal.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/emin-lucas-whiteread/>.

17 To some degree this show followed on the premise established by the 1983 *At Home* exhibition at Long Beach.

18 Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006.

19 Dimitrakaki's introduction to and first question in "The Lessons of *Sexual Politics*: From the 1970s to Empire: An Interview with Amelia Jones," *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, eds., Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2013, pp. 93-94.

20 Two key shows in the 1990s related to feminist curating histories, but not explicitly feminist, include Zdenka Badinovinac's important *Body and the East*, at Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia in 1998 (the catalogue is entitled *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1998), and Bojana Pejić's *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, which initially opened at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm, in 1999 (catalogue by the same name, in two volumes, edited by Pejić and David Elliot, Moderna Museet, Stockholm 1999). Pejić's show presented art from the former Soviet bloc (and related) countries in Eastern Europe and included one section on gender.

21 In addition to the shows highlighted here, the exhibitions include: the 2005 Venice Biennale, curated by Rosa Martinez and Maria De Corral, with its feminist theme; the large-scale exhibition of feminist art at the Migros Museum in Zurich in 2006, *It's Time for Action (There's No Option): About Feminism*, curated by Heike Munder; the ambitious *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Bilbao (2007), curated by Xabier Arakistain. In addition, numerous spin-off or critically interventionist exhibitions organized at commercial and community galleries presumably to counter the narratives posed by these major venues (including the rather disturbing *Womanizer* exhibition at Deitch Projects, New York, in January 2007, the advertisement of which depicts a woman's naked body being mutilated in a meat grinder); the exhibition *Role Play: Feminist Art Revisited, 1960-1980*, at Galerie Lelong in spring of 2007; and two exhibitions in Los Angeles intervening in the narrative of feminist art history posed by the Museum of Contemporary Art Wack! exhibition,, the sharp-edged *Aqui No Hay Virgenes: Queer Latina Visibility*, organized by Jennifer Doyle and Raquel Gutierrez for the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center Gallery, and the *Shared Women* show highlighting queer feminist relations at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, both in the spring of 2007; and, at New York University, *Off-Center Femininities: Regards from Serbia and Montenegro*, organized by Jovana Stokic.

22 Special journal issues include the March 2007 issue of *Frieze*, and the February 2007 issue of *Art News*, entitled "Feminist Art: The Next Wave." See also, Viv Groskop, "All Hail the Feminaissance," with the subtitle "For years feminist artists have been sidelined, or even derided. But now, almost overnight, the art world can't get enough of them," *The Guardian* section G-2 (11 May, 2007), pp. 14-15.

23 For example, in 2007 the Museum of Modern Art in New York hosted the symposium "The Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts"; the Museum of Contemporary Art and University of Southern California sponsored a symposium entitled "Is Feminism Still Relevant?: Race and Globalisation in the Twenty-First Century"; the University of Pretoria in Johannesburg hosted the conference "Taking a Hard Look: Feminism and Visual Culture"; and the conference "Gender Values and the Impact of Feminism in the 1970s" was held at the Contemporary Art Centre of Galicia, Santiago de Compostela, Spain. In 2008, the Moderna Museet in Stockholm hosted the conference "Feminisms, Historiography and Curatorial Practices," where I presented the first version of this material. I participated in all of these events with the exception of the Museum of Modern Art conference and there are surely more I am not aware of that took place in this period.

24 Juan Vicente Aliaga, Press Release for *Gender Battle*. Accessed 18.03 2016. <http://www.undo.net/cgi-bin/undo/pressrelease/pressrelease.pl?id=1189601592&day=1189634400>.

25 I am grateful to Camille Morineau for discussing the genesis of the show with me in Paris, 1 October 2009.

26 Aldred Paquement, Preface to *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle*, Centre Pompidou, Paris, 2009, p. 13.

27 The first part of the exhibition took place in May 2005 as a part of Poznan Art Fair in the Kulczyk Foundation Galleries, the second, larger, part of the exhibition in the Center of Contemporary Art "Laznia" in Gdansk in June 2006. See Leszkowicz, "The Queer Story of Polish Art and Subjectivity," *ArtMargins: Contemporary Central and East European Visual Culture* (April 10, 2006), available at: <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/featured-articles/163-the-queer-story-of-polish-art-and-subjectivity->. Accessed 18.03.2016. See also Leszkowicz's essay "The Male Nude as a Queer Feminist Iconography in Contemporary Polish Art," *Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories*, Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, eds., University of Manchester Press, Manchester, 2016, pp. 185-203.

28 In conversation with Connie Butler in 2009, she noted to me that the Museum of Contemporary Art had constrained her by not allowing her to include extended wall texts on individual works.

29 See the catalogue by the same name, Agnieszka Morawinska and Boris Marte, eds., Walther König, Cologne, 2010; and the reader edited by Pejić, *Gender Check: A Reader*, Walther König, Cologne, 2011.

30 As Pejić noted, "it is indeed surprising that gender is discussed in countless books and anthologies analyzing communist and post-communist condition from a sociological point of view, but there is no publication focusing on gender in socialist art," from "Bojana Pejić on Gender and Feminism in Eastern European Art," Interview with Hedvig Turai (Budapest), *ArtMargins: Contemporary Culture and East European Visual Culture* (December 18, 2009). Accessed 07.11.2010. <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews/540-bojana-pejic-gender-feminism-eastern-european-art-interview>.

31 Ibid.

32 See the Hauser & Wirth website statement about the show, available at: <http://www.hauserwirth.com/exhibitions/2712/revolution-in-the-making-br>

abstract-sculpture-by-women-1947-y-2016/view/. Accessed 20.03.2016. Presumably this statement was written by Sorkin, who is a feminist, rather than by Schimmel, who is (to say the least) not noted as one.

33 I am referring at the end here to the arguments Simone de Beauvoir makes in *The Second Sex* (1949), first translated into English in 1953 and retranslated by Constance Borde, Vintage, London, 2011. The text in this paragraph is revised from my essay in the *elles@centrepompidou* catalogue: "'Genital Panic,' the Threat of Feminist Bodies, and Parafeminism," *elles@centrepompidou*, pp. 290-295.

34 This scholar was myself; the interview took place 6 November 2009 and was for a project entitled "Los Angeles Goes Live," sponsored by Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions.

35 On strategic essentialism, see Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" (1985), *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge, New York & London, 1987, pp. 197-221.

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