Curating Differently
Curating Differently:

_Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces_

Edited by
Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe

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Fig. 8-1. Iris Häussler, *He Dreamed Overtime*, the 18th Biennale of Sydney: *all our relations*, 2012. Photo: Sibyl Fisher. Reproduced with kind permission of BildKunst and the artist.
Feminist theories and methodologies are by now well integrated into art historical research and artistic practices. In recent years, feminisms in art have been institutionalized in major art exhibitions, predominantly in Europe and North America, and have attracted vast attention. Some examples are WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution (Los Angeles and touring), Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art (the opening exhibition for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum in New York), REBELLE: Art & Feminism 1969–2009 (Arnhem), Konstfeminism: Strategier och effekter i Sverige från 1970-talet till idag (Helsingborg and touring), Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism (Bilbao), Goddesses (Oslo), Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe (Vienna and Warsaw), Gender Battle (Santiago de Compostela), and The Beginning Is Always Today: Contemporary Feminist Art in Scandinavia (Kristiansand).

In addition, public art museums have shown a growing interest in working with feminist perspectives and gender equality in relation to museum collections (see e.g. the Second Museum of Our Wishes project, Moderna Museet, Stockholm and the Modern Women Project, Museum of Modern Art, New York). Obviously, feminist art curating, as a practice of art interpretation and a politics of display, intersects with the diverse area of feminist research and artistic practices. On the other hand, the institutionalization of feminisms, its relative success, or failure, is under debate.1 Institutional critique has been a crucial feminist methodology and many interventions have taken place outside the institutional context of the white cube and have strategically targeted established art practices and ideologies. Indeed, as Hilary Robinson, with reference to Griselda Pollock, recently warned:

What is the effect of separating feminist aesthetic interventions from the larger political and cultural revolution that was feminism and feminist theory, and isolating works and artists within a relatively unaltered curatorial approach and exhibitionary model? We might gain this work for art, but miss its significance in transforming art. For feminism was never an art movement.2
Curatorial strategies ideologically frame the encounter between art and its publics. If we, as Reesa Greenberg proposes, understand exhibitions as discursive events, it becomes urgent to ask for a deeper understanding of feminist exhibitions and curatorial practices in relation to wider political, economic, and social structures in local and global contexts. It is only recently, however, that a theorization of feminist art curating and feminist exhibition histories as a specific field of knowledge have emerged.

A seminal publication was the “Curatorial Strategies” issue of n.paradoxa edited by Renee Baert and Katy Deepwell in 2006. Four years later, Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices, edited by Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, focusing on historiographical critique and the relation between academic and curatorial feminist practices, was published. The international research network Transnational perspectives on women’s art, feminism and curating, whose participants included scholars, curators and artists, arranged a number of workshop seminars and symposia between 2010 and 2012 devoted to this particular field of research. Related to this international collaboration is the volume on Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe, edited by Katrin Kivimaa, which claims the emancipation of Eastern European perspectives in feminist thinking and curatorial practice.

Further major contributions to the field are Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, which investigates the impact of feminism on curatorial practice and exhibition cultures in Europe and North America, and Women’s:Museum. Curatorial Politics in Feminism. Education, History, and Art, edited by Elke Krasny, which offers a transnational historiography of feminist strategies and curatorial activism in and out of the museum. Another example of the growing research interest in feminism, art, and the politics of exhibitions is Monika Kaiser’s Neubesitzungen des Kunst-Raumes: Feministische Kunstausstellungen und ihre Räume, 1972–1987, which is an in-depth study of feminist exhibitions of women’s art with particular focus on spatial meaning production.

Research related to issues of feminist exhibitions, curatorial practices, and art museums’ collections has also been presented in publications concerning museum critique and cultural politics, e.g. Griselda Pollock’s Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive, Griselda Pollock and Joyce Zemans’ (ed.), Museum after Modernism: Strategies of Engagement, and the Swedish Arts Council’s research report Representation och regionalitet. Genusstrukturer i fyra svenska konstmuseisamlingar edited by Anna Tellgren and Jeff Werner.
Curating Differently

The essays in *Curating Differently: Feminisms, Exhibitions and Curatorial Spaces* present critical perspectives on and analyses of feminist art curating and exhibiting, its strategies, interventions and histories. The general objective of the volume is to present scholarly analyses and critical reflections on the diverse practices of feminist art curating and exhibition practices from the 1970s onward. The context is not limited to art museums and exhibitions alone, but includes alternative spaces for artistic and curatorial interventions. The essays included in the anthology depart from case studies that theorize diverse strategies and interventions in curatorial space and relate them to socio-political and national contexts as well as global economic structures. Moreover, they critically scrutinize feminist exhibitions and “gender equality” strategies in public art museums in recent years and present a specifically curatorial perspective on exhibition practices. Collectively, the essays contribute with historical perspectives on feminist exhibition practices and curatorial models, first-hand accounts of feminist interventions within the art museum as well as timely analyses of current intersections of feminisms within curating in the global art world.

The majority of the essays in the volume were presented in the “Feminisms and Curating” sessions, chaired by Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, at the NORDIK X art history conference in Stockholm in October 2012. “Feminisms and Curating” amounted to three sessions and was the largest session at the conference due to considerable national and international attention, hence substantiating the current scholarly interest in the transnational field of feminist curatorial and exhibition studies. The topical questions addressed in the sessions thus also form a framework for the essays in this book: How can the diverse practices feminist art curating and feminist exhibitions be theorized and historicized? Which feminist theories and methodologies have informed the strategies of feminist art curating?

Departing from the exhibitions *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) and *Womanhouse* (1972), both held in Los Angeles, Eva Zetterman in her essay “Curatorial strategies on the art scene during the Feminist Movement: Los Angeles in the 1970s” explores the curatorial strategies within different sectors of the city’s art scenes during the 1970s by examining the mainstream and the alternative approaches, respectively. Los Angeles was a major site for both the Chicano Civil Rights Movement and the Feminist Movement at the time, but as Zetterman highlights, white Anglo American feminists and brown Chicano feminists mainly organized in separate
networks, which resulted in different curatorial strategies and in a geographical separation of the alternative art scenes that paralleled the socio-spatial division of Los Angeles in the 1970s. Her discussion on Chicana artists’ collaborative groups and Chicana/o alternative art spaces serves as a reminder of the feminist art movement’s exclusion of non-white artists and calls attention to Chicana artists opposing intersecting structures of discrimination and marginalization and hence organizing into coalitions of greater diversity. Critically examining the mainstream art scene of Los Angeles in the 1970s, Zetterman shows how the Eurocentric selection criteria guiding feminist “landmark” exhibitions such as *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976) at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art have been justified in retrospect, thus perpetuating the marginalisation of Chicanas in the historiography of the feminist art movement in the US.

The practices and strategies of two curators are at the centre of Osnat Zukerman Rechter’s essay “Reformulating the Code: A Feminist Interpretation of the Curatorial Work of Sara Breitberg-Semel and Galia Bar Or During the 1980s and 1990s in Israel”. In her in-depth account of their work, Zukerman Rechter traces the manner in which they attempted to redefine the boundaries of their curatorial roles within the institutional setting of the museum. She defines Sara Breitberg-Semel’s curatorial strategy to resist the institution from within—a way of exploring and emphasizing the gap between the curator’s individual action and the institutional apparatus of the museum to which she belonged—as a principle that aligns to a feminist consciousness, even though Breitberg-Semel herself never overtly declared a feminist position. In contrast, Galia Bar Or explicitly emphasized her curatorial model—based on values of solidarity and cooperation and a critical stance towards canonical and geographical centres and peripheries—as a feminist approach. In her analysis, Zukerman Rechter points out the separate courses that Breitberg-Semel and Bar Or have followed, but she also indicates a strategy of closeness as a common feminist denominator in their curatorial work.

In “Moments of contradictions: Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti, 1982–1983”, Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe calls attention to juxtaposition and montage as curatorial strategies employed in the exhibition *Frida Kahlo and Tina Modotti* that toured Europe and North America in 1982 and 1983. She locates the curatorial model of the exhibition within a specific intellectual framework of politically motivated cultural practices, fostered by a renewed interest in the theories and practices of the German poet, dramatist and director Bertolt Brecht within British cultural debates of the 1970s and 80s, and argues that the exhibition produced a critical space beyond the implicit or explicit generalizations inherent in survey
exhibitions of women’s art and the strategic adaptation of mainstream art history’s values and norms in the one woman show. Thus, despite the dilemma that the discursive framework of the exhibition might cause for today’s feminists, Sjöholm Skrubbe maintains that its critical mode of juxtaposition and montage, and its disturbing effects, might still provide a curatorial model to build on for future feminist interventions in the art world.

In her essay “A short history of Women’s Exhibitions from the 1970s to the 1990s—between feminist struggles and hegemonic appropriation”, Doris Guth discusses “women’s exhibitions”, a phenomenon that since the 1970s has evoked critical debates along the contradictory positions pending between those who advocate exhibitions with women’s art only as a necessary strategic act and those who question women’s exhibitions as a curatorial model that risks ghettoizing women artists and reinforcing the hegemonic system of canonical art history. In a close reading of three women’s exhibitions of the 1990s—Women artists of the 20th Century in Wiesbaden (1990), Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the Feminine in Kortrijk, London, Boston, Washington, and Perth (1994–1997), and Bad Girls in London and Glasgow (1993–1994)—Guth critically elaborates on some basic phenomena pertaining to the all-women-show as possible strategic act. Her analysis shows that good intentions and critical interventions in mainstream curatorial models might well end up as counterproductive, reifying essentialist concepts of identity or de-politicizing pertinent feminist issues in superficial analyses. Guth locates a more promising approach to the concept of the women’s exhibition in Vraiment. Féminisme et art, shown in Grenoble in 1997, where the curator Laura Cottingham managed to negotiate female identity and feminist aesthetics in relation to actual socio-political conditions for artistic production and reception.

The ambition to enable “transformative encounters” between the curator, the art object and the public is at the core of Margareta Gynning’s work as an art pedagogue, curator and feminist scholar at the Nationalmuseum in Stockholm. Departing from her many years of professional experiences, her contribution to this book “Transformative Encounters—prior and current strategies of a feminist pioneer” discusses the diverse feminist strategies that she has adopted in order to oppose the hegemony of canonical, modernist art history within the museum. Gynning’s extensive feminist work includes publications, temporary exhibitions, interventions in the museum’s permanent collections, art educational programs, and diverse collaborative projects. Her feminist strategies focus on pedagogical
and relational aspects, image awareness, the importance of dialog, and the use of body language, always with the role of the viewer at the centre. She hence strives to activate museum visitors and creating a laboratory space within the museum that fosters active engagement, sharing, and collaborative processes of interpretative work. Gynning’s essay is a strong argument for the importance of doing feminist work from within large public institutions in order to be able to differentiate canon in the long term.

The Museum of Modern Art, New York’s Modern Women Project (2005–2010), was a key contribution to the vast number of exhibitions, conferences, and projects on art and feminism that developed in the mid-2000s, particularly in Europe and North America. The Modern Women Project included, inter alia, a major scholarly publication on work by women artists in MoMA’s permanent collection, two international symposia, a “Feminist Future Lecture Series”, collaborations with Columbia University, and a series of exhibitions. The project’s co-director Alexandra Schwartz in “MoMA’s Modern Women’s Project, Feminisms, and Curatorial Practice” offers a first-hand account of the development of the project and an analysis of this remarkable, and much debated, moment in the history of art and feminism. Schwartz perspicaciously expounds several societal, political, and art historical reasons for the resurgence of interest in art and feminism in the United States during the mid-2000s and elaborates on the effects of the Modern Women Project within and beyond MoMA, concluding that the project contributed to a fundamental shift in the general culture of gender at MoMA.

Among the many exhibitions and museum projects that elaborated on women’s and/or feminist art in the 2000s, elles@centrepompidou: Women artists in the collection of the Musée national d’art moderne, Centre de création industrielle, presented at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2009–2010), gave rise to a particular set of questions as it was a display event that negotiated between the temporary exhibition and the presentation of permanent collections and, despite its being a display of women artists-only, claimed not to deal with either feminist issues or issues of gender. In her contribution to this book, Malin Hedlin Hayden thus departs from an interest in the difference between an exhibition and a re-arrangement of a museum’s collection and the employment of the notions of “women”, sex, and gender in the theoretical framework of elles@centrepompidou. In her analysis, she locates a crucial paradox in the event’s curatorial model with regard to history as a narrative mode of understanding the past and astutely elucidates on the importance of national context in relation to how and what concepts such as sex and gender come to mean.
In her essay “Major global recurring art shows ‘doing feminist work’: A case study of the 18th Biennale of Sydney: all our relations (2012)”, Sibyl Fisher offers an insightful consideration of how the 18th Biennale of Sydney enacted a feminist ethos and/or politics. The theoretical and curatorial framework of the Biennale articulated an expanded concept of relationality—encompassing social, intercultural, trans-subjective, and trans-species relations—and the show thus dedicated itself to “inclusionary practices of generative thinking”. Employing the concept of feminist work, Fisher focuses on experiences of affect in the exhibition and offers a personalized and critical reflection on her ambivalent experiences of the Biennale. She asks what feminist work was made possible by the exhibition, through its performative and active potentialities, and prompts the question of whether the curators of the Biennale described relations or produced them, concluding that the curatorial framework pushed her into new considerations and thus expanded the idea of what feminist work might be and do.

Notes


2 Robinson, “Feminism meets the Big Exhibition,” 147. Italics in original.


6 The network participants were Lara Perry, University of Brighton, UK; Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK; Marko Daniel, Tate Modern, UK; Kristina Huneault, Concordia University, Canada; Nancy Proctor, Smithsonian,
USA. The documentation of the network’s activities, e.g. webcasts and reports, is available online: University of Brighton: Arts and Humanities, “Transnational perspectives on women’s art, feminism and curating.” http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/projects/irn.

