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### *Feminism meets the Big Exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005*

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**Citation:** ROBINSON, H., 2016. Feminism meets the big exhibition: Museum survey shows since 2005. OnCurating.org, 29, pp. 26-40.

**Additional Information:**

- This paper was published in OnCurating.org, it can be viewed [http://www.on-curating.org/issue-29.html#.W\\_0V2uj7SH1](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-29.html#.W_0V2uj7SH1)

**Metadata Record:** <https://dspace.lboro.ac.uk/2134/36233>

**Version:** Published

**Publisher:** Dorothee Richter, Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)

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# Curating in Feminist Thought

With Contributions by

Nanne Buurman

Laura Castagnini

Susanne Clausen

Lina Džuverović

Victoria Horne

Amelia Jones

Elke Krasny

Kirsten Lloyd

Michaela Melián

Gabrielle Moser

Heike Munder

Lara Perry

Helena Reckitt

Maura Reilly

Irene Revell

Jenny Richards

Dorothee Richter

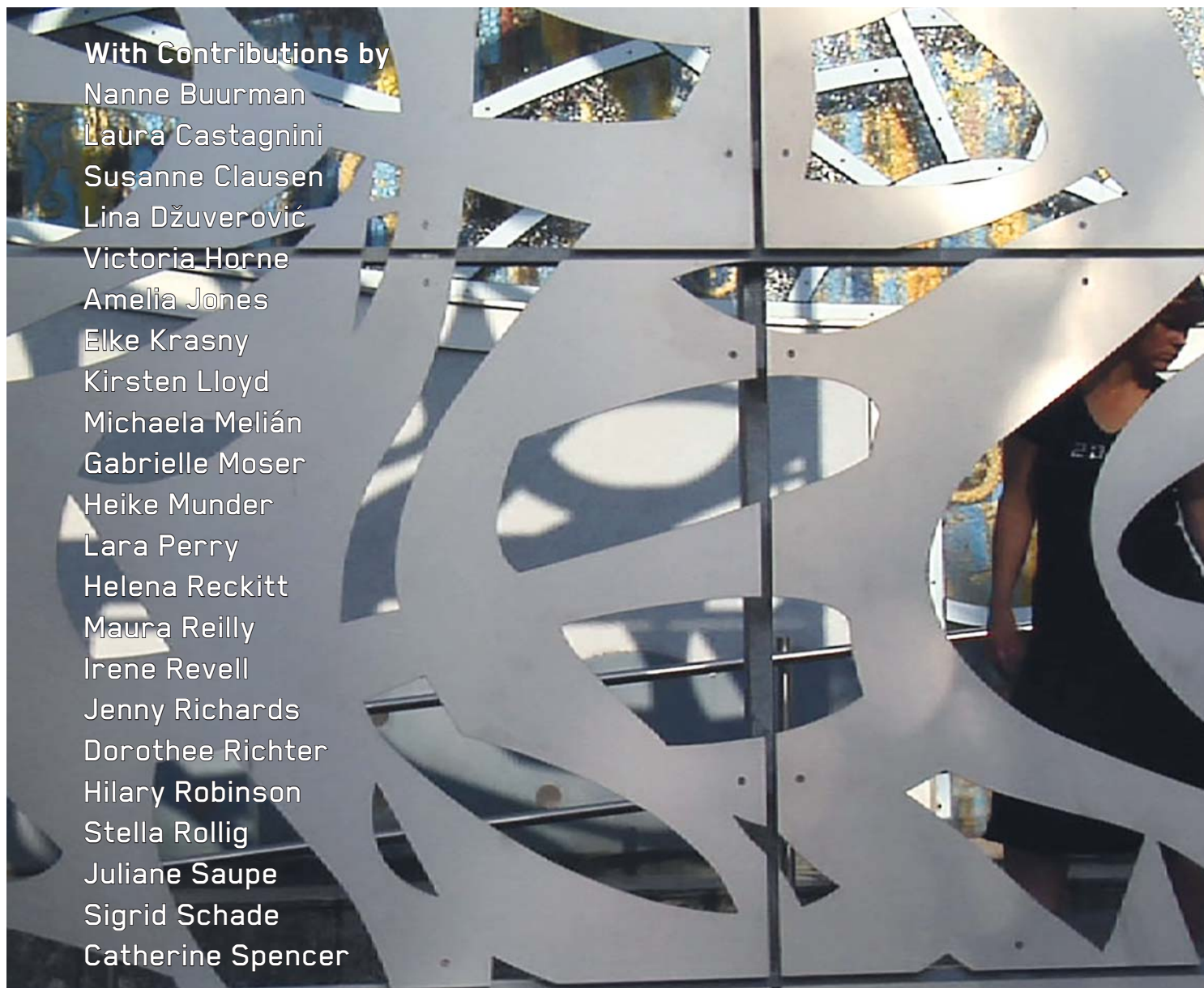
Hilary Robinson

Stella Rollig

Juliane Saupe

Sigrid Schade

Catherine Spencer



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Imprint

# Feminism Meets the Big Exhibition: Museum Survey Shows since 2005

## Hilary Robinson

In the years 2005-2011 something remarkable happened. Feminist art and/or art by women was made the focus of many exhibitions in major museums. If we include the venues that hosted touring versions of the exhibitions, some twenty or more institutions in different parts of the world put significant time and financial resources into surveys of feminist art and/or art by women. This phenomenon occurred mostly in European countries, but also in the USA, Iceland, Russia, Japan and elsewhere. In addition to these survey exhibitions, feminism intersected with other major spaces and places in the global field of contemporary art. The Venice Biennale, with its national pavilions, is the longest-standing international art exhibition; its 51st edition (Venice, Italy, 2005) was spoken of as “the so-called ‘feminist Biennale’” (O’Donnell; see also Nochlin, Jones). In the 12th manifestation of the massive quinquennial survey of contemporary art, documenta (Kassel, Germany, 2007), women formed 46% of the artists—an unusually high percentage—and “feminism and feminist art were on the agenda” (Esner 239). In various countries other mainstream museums put on thematic exhibitions of feminist work with smaller numbers of artists, such as *It’s Time For Action (There’s No Option): About Feminism* (Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich, Switzerland, 2006); *The International Incheon Women Artists’ Biennale* was established in Incheon, Korea (2007, 2009, 2011); and in 2010 the *Modern Woman* project at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, was made manifest through a series of exhibitions, a publication, film screenings, gallery talks, and a symposium.

These exhibitions have occurred 35-40 years after the women’s liberation movement, the art world, and art history first intersected in a way that was highly productive, and they have occurred in venues that are in sharp contrast to the often alternative, non-traditional, venues that hosted the first exhibitions informed by the women’s liberation movement. That so many major museums felt that it was timely to reassess this movement and its intersection with the art world provokes the questions: What feminist politics informed these exhibitions, and what feminist politics did they produce? As a result of the choices made by the curators, how would viewers of these exhibitions understand the intersection of feminism with the art world? What was the curators’ reading of the history of this work? What histories of feminism have these exhibitions produced? This essay will examine four of the survey exhibitions in an attempt to answer some of these questions.

### Context

Some of the survey exhibitions were national. For example, the *MOT Annual 2005: Life Actually, The Works of Contemporary Japanese Women in Japan, The Will as a Weapon: Review*, in Iceland, and *Dream and Reality: Modern and Contemporary Women Artists from Turkey* explored the movement within national contexts and cultural specificities. Some were regional or cultural. *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity*

in the *Art of Eastern Europe*, which was shown in both Austria and Poland, explored art made in twenty-four countries over a period of fifty years both before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall; *La Costilla Maldita*, in Gran Canaria focused on Spanish-speaking artists from Europe and from Latin America, with the aim of showing similarities and differences. Other exhibitions were more fully international in intent. *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (USA), *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Spain), and *REBELLE. Art and Feminism 1969-2009*, all aimed at an international representation of the movement, although with different results. Some were limited to particular decades or timeframes (*WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* focused on the late '60s and the '70s, while *Global Feminisms* (USA) took the period 1990-2007); *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* encompassed the construction and representation of sexual identity by both male and female artists, as did *A Batalla dos Xéneros/Gender Battles* (Spain).

But despite these significant differences, what the exhibitions share is crucial in four respects. First, they all purport to be surveys, as distinct from the many themed feminist exhibitions or exhibitions of women's art that also occurred during these years, like *It's Time For Action (There's No Option): About Feminism*. Second, they all intersect with feminist thought, in either the stated curatorial impulse for the exhibition, and/or in much of the art selected, and/or in the ancillary products of the exhibition such as the catalogues. Third, they have occurred at the time when the lived experience of the women's movement is turning into the subject of History, and its impulses are being disciplined, defined, written, and, in the art world, canonized. Fourth, they all occupied major national or regional museums and galleries.

Thus, what we see happening during this time is that institutions that are structurally central to the art world (national or regional museums, the kind of institutions that are arguably most able to determine the definition and reach of categories in Art History, and the artists and art works of most significance to them) were presenting their own definitions of what they consider a feminist art movement to be, or what they consider contemporary art by women to be capable of saying. In this manner, these institutions are determining an Art Historical category of 'Feminist Art' or 'Art by Women'. As they do this, they offer the exhibition visitor an apparently seamless proposition: the visitor sees what is there, and doesn't see what is not there, and it can be hard to argue with the proposition as a result. If the exhibition is elegantly structured in relation to the exhibiting space, and the works are beautifully positioned in relation to the gallery and each other, the visitor can be lulled into an unquestioning acceptance. There can be great pleasure in seeing works that had previously only been known through reproductions in books, and also in encountering previously unknown works in that context. Unless s/he has a deep knowledge of an exhibition's subject of enquiry, the visitor will be unlikely to see the gaps and the choices; s/he will certainly not see the stories behind certain works not being there because of, say, the artist's or the owner's unwillingness to loan them, and even less will s/he see the active choices of exclusion made by the curator. S/he will have the experience of walking around the exhibition, from room to room, and will glean important understandings of the intent of the curator from the way the works are grouped together and placed in relation to each other; s/he will be able to read any labels and wall-mounted texts, pick up leaflets and other material. Eventually, the major trace of the exhibition will be in the catalogue, if there is one, available either for purchase or for loan through library systems. Increasingly, catalogues contain commissioned essays by people who have had no part in making the exhibition, but who write in broad support, complementarity, or augmentation, rather than close critique, of the curator's

argument. But catalogues also usually contain an essay by the curator or curators, outlining the intent of the exhibition—the story that they are trying to tell, its background, and what has informed the way they have structured this narrative. The catalogue is often a lavish publication (the \$60 or £45 catalogue is not a rarity), intended to have integrity as a publication independently from the exhibition, and to be coherent and of interest to people who were unable to see the exhibition. At the same time, it is also often the main source of information about the thinking that went into structuring and presenting the exhibition. It can thus provide a point of contrast for the visitor to the exhibition between the curatorial intent and its realization in the museum; and to the non-visitor, it exists as an opaque stand-in for the first-hand experience of exhibition.

What is clear from the catalogues for the exhibitions listed above, and from personal visits that I was able to make to some of them, is that each of the exhibitions had a further distinction, over and above the overt distinctions giving bounds to the exhibition—distinctions of location or chronology—that I indicated. Possibly the most significant distinction between the exhibitions—and, by extension, their curators—is their definition of, and relationship to, feminism. While the words “feminism” or “feminist” were in many of the exhibition titles, there is by no means curatorial agreement on what this might mean, how significant it is, whether it is located in the realm of politics, or culture, or social exchange. Still less is there agreement on what might constitute feminist practices in art. I will explore some of these exhibitions, particularly through their catalogues, in order to draw out this point.

#### ***WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution***

The title of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007) indicated that the art exhibited would not necessarily be feminist art; rather, the exhibition explored the relationships between art and what is termed (in the first sentence in the catalogue) the “social movement” of feminism (Strick 7). This was reinforced at its originating venue, the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art (LA MoCA), when visitors entered the exhibition to see a 13-foot-diameter hanging fabric piece, a magnificent work by Magdalena Abakanowicz: *Abakan Red* (1969). Abakanowicz is an artist not known for identification with the women’s movement or feminist thought. This piece, however, has some formal resonances with what in the early 1970s Judy Chicago was to call “central core” or “cunt” imagery, and Barbara Rose was to call “vaginal iconology”, and it was presumably selected to open the exhibition for this reason.

*WACK!* was a large, rambling exhibition. The viewer walked from one (unlabelled) section to another, around the screens and partitions in the hangar-like museum, without necessarily recognising the categories that were laid out in the catalogue; rather, there was a flow, with works in different areas relating to each other through their media and their content. It was an extraordinary opportunity for the visitor to see work in actuality that had often only circulated in black-and-white photographs in significant publications from the 1970s. This was one of the great pleasures for the viewer in visiting *WACK!*: seeing works that might be recognised from having seen them in reproduction—works that could be named, but had rarely been exhibited before. In total there were 119 artists and artist groups arranged in eighteen different curatorial sections. It is worth naming these sections: Goddess; Gender Performance; Pattern and Assemblage; Body Trauma; Taped and Measured; Autophotography; Making Art History; Speaking in Public; Silence and Noise; Female Sensibility; Abstraction; Gendered Space; Collective Impulse; Social Sculpture; Knowledge as Power; Body as Medium; Labor; Family Stories. These are

categories of style, media, imagery, content, and intent. As a group they are surprisingly apolitical for a field that included so many activist individuals, groups, interventions, and artworks.

In the first few lines of her catalogue essay, curator Cornelia Butler states her definition of feminism. It is one that she quotes from Peggy Phelan who, Butler says, “has offered what seems to be the most serviceable definition of feminism: ‘the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favours men over women’” (Butler, 15). Stated like this, the definition emphasises the apolitical, non-activist curatorial categories used in placing the works in the exhibition space. It also removes it from a chronology that Phelan laid out in her original text, written in 2001 (two decades after the time period for *WACK!* came to an end) and in the context of a survey essay in a volume on feminism and art that covers nearly four decades, up to the time of her writing. In that book, Phelan offers her “bold, if broad, definition” in recognition that “the ideological stakes in the question ‘what is feminism?’ have often led to increasingly sophisticated but, it must be admitted also, increasingly evasive responses” (18). Butler goes on to situate her own first “interest in 1970s feminist art” in her witness of two catalysts for the formation of the Women’s Action Coalition in New York in 1991 and 1992 (17). First was the way in which attention to Matthew Barney’s breakthrough exhibition “virtually eclipsed several other simultaneous exhibitions featuring women artists” and dominated the discussion in a panel with the title “What Role Will the Language of Feminism Play in the Art World of the ‘90s?” Second was the intention of the Guggenheim Museum to open its new branch in New York’s Soho with an exhibition of only white men (Butler 18-20).

So here Butler is indicating her interest in feminist art as the product of internal art world events, rather than as a commitment to feminist thought and action as a broader political position that is then brought to bear upon the art world amongst other things. In the article from which Butler quotes, Peggy Phelan called our attention to this distinction when working from and within a highly localised art world framework: “Writing about art has traditionally been concerned with that which is interior to the frame, whereas feminism has focused primarily on what lies outside the frame of patriarchal logic, representation, history and justice—which is to say the lives of most women” (17). Identifying this difference is not to deny that the awareness of the need for feminist thought and action can come from any catalyst; but there is a move towards vigilance and activism in Phelan’s observation, which is not embraced by Butler. Instead, what we find in Butler’s essay is the conceptualisation and articulation of two things: first, of a feminism that is interior to the frame of US (or New York) Art History; and, second, of an exhibition that embodies the struggle to move beyond that frame. It is fundamentally an incorporative approach—one that attempts to assimilate feminism as a practice of art into the particularity of that art history.

This is made evident in the catalogue essay written by Connie Butler as the curator of *WACK!* Exclusions from exhibitions are always interesting, as they form the framework that determines the argument presented by the curator: not part of the picture, they constitute its borders, and therefore, its definition, its ‘edge’. The exclusions that are brought to the attention of the exhibition-viewer and the catalogue-reader become precisely those porous and slippery moments where intention is made explicit. Apart from discussing her reasons for excluding men artists as a category from the exhibition, Butler tells us why she excluded one artist whom she names:

Another test of feminism's relevance and resiliency occurs with artists who did not participate in, and whose work did not circulate through, the mainstream (read: white) art world. Emily Kame Kngwarreye, for example, was an Australian aboriginal artist who, during the 1970s, made textiles as part of the Utopia Women's Batik Group [...] Though Kngwarreye later gained recognition for her abstract paintings, which were shown in galleries during the 1980s, she is not represented in *WACK!* because the economy in which the Utopia Group's early production circulated did not favor institutional collections and archives. (17)

From a feminist perspective, this is a surprising statement for two reasons. First is the identification of "the mainstream (read: white) art world" without equal recognition of the mainstream being additionally male and Eurocentric: feminist thinking in the art world has not only happened within the traditional studio, but to a very large extent as an institutional critique of the structures of the art world it was trying to occupy and change. The position of what the mainstream art world of the 1970s might define as ethnically specific craft-work made by a woman (in this case, the textiles made by Kngwarreye as a member of the Utopia Women's Batik Group) would be one that was compromised on numerous fronts, and Western feminists at the time and in subsequent decades were struggling (often with each other) over the re-contextualisation of works such as those by Kngwarreye. This included direct challenges to, and circumvention of, the curatorial categories that produced such exclusions. The second surprising aspect to Butler's statement is that as feminist artists and writers of the 1970s were analysing the exclusion by the mainstream of artists who were women, who were black, and who were non-Western European, they were also identifying a number of different strategies that artists and curators could take. One was what might be called "an equal-rights feminism"—an attempt to enter institutional structures on a par with men. A second strategy was to re-structure the art world to make it less exclusionary—"that rotten pie", as Lucy Lippard called it in 1974 (26). A third strategy was to set up alternative, feminist, or woman-centred structures, as happened through Europe, the USA, and elsewhere in the 1970s, in the process reconfiguring the relationship between artists and curators. The realities with which Emily Kane Kngwarreye was dealing as an Aboriginal woman in Australia in the 1970s were very different from those of the vast majority of women living in the USA or Europe at that time; but the fact remains that many of the works in *WACK!* were made deliberately for circulation in environments that bypassed the mainstream of the art world. This was not peculiar to feminist artists: for example, in the 1960s and 1970s performance artist Allan Kaprow recognised that much art produced as "anti-art" was eventually incorporated into art world institutions and market without disturbance, and he consequently focused on producing "non-art" (Kaprow *passim*). But the analysis—and eschewing—of patriarchal mainstream structures was a notable part of feminist practices in the 1970s. Indeed, a number of artists in *WACK!* produced works in this way, even if they did later gain entrance to the authorizing place of the museum exhibition. So we can see through Butler's positioning of Kngwareye that *WACK!* is a fundamentally revisionist version of the history that is less impelled by feminist thinking than it is by contemporary curatorial and art historical practices, realised on an archival scale.

### ***Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism***

There is a great contrast between Connie Butler's curatorial catalogue essay, and the one provided by Xabier Arakistain in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism* (Bilbao, 2007). This exhibition, five years in the making, opened three months after *WACK!*, and comprised "69 works and 36 artists and three feminist



groups from various countries which initiated and/or have continued to give substance to what has come to be known as ‘feminist art’, according to the museum website. In comparison with the 129 artists of the USA exhibition, this is much smaller, but there is also this clear indication that all the work is feminist. In his curator’s essay, like Butler in hers, Arakistain outlines the thinking that informed the curating of the exhibition; he gives the curatorial categories developed for the exhibition, and he comments on a small amount of his autobiographical experience with feminist thinking in the art world prior to the exhibition.

Despite covering forty-five years of work, in distinction from the focus on approximately twelve years of work included in *WACK!*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* had five curatorial categories rather than *WACK!*’s eighteen. Arakistain describes them thus:

1. *The fight for the civil and political rights of women* and the political and artistic implications of the maxim “the personal is political”, revealing the political nature of the private sphere, without excluding categories of class and race.
2. *The cultural construction of sex, gender and sexuality* and denunciation of sexist stereotypes.
3. Struggles relation to *the liberalisation of women’s bodies*.
4. Condemnation of *violence against women*.
5. *Feminist practice to make women visible and include them in the history of humankind*, to write a true history that does not leave more than fifty per cent of the population out of the story. (242)

In contrast to *WACK!*’s more museological and art-world categories, all of the categories in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* are directly related to political and activist themes central to feminist thought and the women’s movement. The approach to the selection and installation of work is, therefore, thoroughly informed by knowledge of feminist activism, its foci, and the theory it produced. More than that, it is informed by Arakistain’s earlier work as the co-ordinator of the *Arts and Feminisms ARCO Forum 2002-2005*, which led to the *ARCO 2005 Manifesto* (Arakistain 244). The Manifesto gives a brief but forceful account of the exclusion of women in the Spanish state-run museums and other state-sponsored exhibitions, such as participation in international biennials. It then calls for the establishment of an expert group to analyse the situation; for in-house policies of equity in museums; and for the application of feminist policies, including the establishment of quotas. The manifesto then informed the drawing up of Article 26 of a 2007 Act of Parliament concerning the equality of the sexes. This article requires that all Spanish government structures responsible for the production and management of Spanish culture must ensure gender equity among exhibiting artists, advisory groups, and decision-makers, and that they must be pro-active in supporting women artists fulfil their potential. This is possibly the most radical legislation in support of women artists anywhere (*Ley Orgánica*).

Throughout his essay, Arakistain is careful to avoid essentialising the category of ‘Feminist Art’, instead indicating how the category has been constructed. His argument is that the feminist movement as we know it now can be traced back to the 18th-century Enlightenment, and that the calls for political and civil rights for women that materialised in the 1960s began to manifest themselves in art for the first time at that moment. Thus, his focus is upon particular works of art that demonstrate this, specifically, works that are “placing the problematic of representation right in the foreground. This means asking oneself who represents whom, from what point of view and how, keeping constant tabs on the different systems of representation that continue to construct and transmit stereotypes of sex, gen-

der, 'race' and sexuality" (Arakistain 241). He argues that the concepts of 'excellence' and 'the canon' within the art world are constructions of power, and notes with surprise and concern that many key works he selected for the exhibition still belonged to the artists themselves, and had not been purchased whether by private collectors or by public institutions. The market had not valued such work, despite their appearance in books and catalogues, and their 'aura' for those who have valued feminism. This discussion of his curatorial process and thinking is in contrast with Butler's positioning of Kngwarreye's work, demonstrating the political and activist definitions of feminism that informed his choices. It is precisely what Phelan calls a focus "on what lies outside the frame of patriarchal logic, representation, history and justice" (17).

### ***REBELLE. Art and Feminism 1969-2009***

In 2009, approximately two years after *WACK!* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* had opened, *elles@centrepompidou* opened in Paris and (three days later and about an hour's flight away) *REBELLE: Art and Feminism 1969-2009* opened in Arnhem. *elles@centrepompidou* came about in part after it proved too expensive to host *WACK!* for another stop on its tour: ironically, as a result, the Pompidou mounted one of the more politically complex and certainly the largest of the survey exhibitions. *REBELLE*, conversely, was a long time in the making; while it "concretely started taking shape in 2004", it was eventually timed for 2009, a significant feminist anniversary in the Netherlands as it was both thirty years after the important Dutch exhibition *Feministische kunst internationale (International Feminist Art)* (1979) and forty years after the founding of the Dutch feminist group *Dolle Mina* in 1969 (Westen 13).

*REBELLE*, held in the Museum voor Moderne Kunst Arnhem (MMKA) in the Netherlands, was an interestingly diverse exhibition. Of the eighty-seven artists, twenty were either Dutch in origin, or trans-national and at the time living in the Netherlands. Many of the Dutch artists were represented by recent work focused in the latter galleries of the exhibition, giving local currency to the presentation. While there were just a handful of artists from the former Eastern bloc, Asia, or Americas beyond the USA, eighteen of the artists were from the Middle East and Africa; the work of all of these artists was integrated in the different thematic areas of the exhibition as appropriate. Seven of the artists were represented by work dating from the 1960s, demonstrating that art was being made from a feminist position in a number of countries while the women's movement was growing, and before the designation "feminist art" had been coined. However, the message that one got from this exhibition was not of nostalgia for a time gone that cannot be recuperated, that can only be celebrated, mourned, and archived. Rather, although the exhibition was not arranged chronologically, it was a demonstration of a movement that is growing, vibrant, and with a lot of work still to do: thirty-three of the artists were represented solely through work made in or since 2000. The presence of artists from African and Arabic countries, alongside artists from Israel, Turkey, and Iran, and some from China, India and elsewhere in Asia, demonstrated a set of feminist issues and languages that, although they may be newly visible in Europe or the USA, should not be confused with or equated with the then-emerging Western European and North American feminist art of the '60s and '70s. Thus *REBELLE* was an exhibition that demonstrated feminisms not solely situated in a Western European/USA past, but in a broader state of becoming, and without a geographical centre—or centres—determining the feminist present and future. The exhibition as a whole, with one focus on Dutch work, and another focus on African and Middle Eastern work, set up a dialogue between a deep, local site, and a broader, developing context.

By the time *REBELLE* opened, MKKA already had a reputation for being supportive of work by women and of feminist work, and had been nicknamed “the women’s museum” in the 1980s. The director from 1982-2000, Liesbeth Brandt Corstius, “developed exhibition and collection policies through which the work of female artists became widely represented”. She had organised exhibitions of the work of Magdalena Abakanovicz, Miriam Cahn, Dorothy Iannone, Nancy Spero, and others, as well as *Het Persoonlijke = Politiek (The Personal = Political)* in 1984 (Westen 10, 12). She was also a contributor to the catalogue for *Feministische kunst internatonaal* in 1979 (Corstius). The curator of *Rebelle*, Mirjam Westen, was also the MKKA’s curator of contemporary art. She had been actively involved in the women’s movement and with feminist arts groups in the 1980s, including Stichting Vrouwen in Beeldende Kunst (Women in the Visual Arts, known as SVBK) and had published in a number of feminist journals. She had also co-organized the historical exhibition *Elck zijn waerom: Vrouwelijke kunstenaars in Noord- en Zuid Nederland 1550-1950 (Everyone Has Their Reasons: Female Artists in the North and South of the Netherlands 1550-1950)*, in 1990-2000 (Westen 12). Under their leadership, the museum had adopted a policy that 50% of the work purchased by the museum should be work by women (Butcher). Such depth of experience and commitment to feminism provided a rare environment—an institutional commitment to feminist thinking and processes—and this in turn is reflected in the structure of the catalogue. Taken as a whole, it follows a different track than either the catalogue for *WACK!* or that for *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. Rather than bringing together contemporary art historians and theorists from different countries to comment on different aspects of this historicizing moment, the five main essays in the catalogue are written by Dutch authors. Intended as “a retrospective look at the Dutch women’s art movement”, Westen’s aim in editing the catalogue in this way was to “include less well-known voices, perspectives and stories, to particularize the history which has been written about in general terms elsewhere” (18). While the catalogue does indeed do that, it does more. It provides an account of an international movement from the point of view of a small European country no longer regarded as a major global force politically or economically, working in a minority language, which at the same time has been pioneering in the feminist thinking, feminist structures, and feminist art it produces. The catalogue does not constantly look over its shoulder to countries like the USA, the UK, and Germany, but rather it acknowledges and incorporates the importance of what happened in a more dominant art and feminist world, while retaining a fully motivated, locally driven and developed set of strategies and politics. Adding further to its particularity, the catalogue was published after the opening of the exhibition, and was therefore able to include documentation of related events and performances.

The curator’s essay provided by Westen does echo those of Butler and Arakstain in providing an overview, a personal history and process, and an indication of the themes of the exhibition. The extensive overview is written from the point of view of Westen’s process of researching and curating the exhibition. It follows the growing feminist interrogation of the art world and how feminist thinking was used to develop new structures, exhibitions, and practices such as teaching, and then moves on to an exploration of different themes that she identifies within the work of feminist artists. She is careful not to put this in generational terms, not to use the concept of ‘waves’ of feminism, “in order to avoid the pitfalls of oppositional and linear historical thinking” (13). Westen describes the thematic structure of the exhibition as five loose groups: 1) criticism of the representation of the feminine; 2) the social constructedness of masculinity and femininity; 3) lesbian and black identities; 4) the creation of new images; and 5) the crossing of boundaries, such as between the public and the private, the personal and the political, and between the

local and the global (18). At least four of these themes can be described as politically informed categories (if not as overtly activist as the themes identified in *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*) rather than categories determined by medium, quasi-art-historical categories, or categories of the museum archive. The invitation extended to this visitor walking around the exhibition was to contrast how different artists had approached these different representational issues. It was a curatorial approach that constructed feminist processes as a set of local strategies and histories with comprehension of a growing global network.

### *elles@centrepompidou*

By far the largest of all the survey exhibitions was *elles@centrepompidou*. This exhibition aimed to be a story of contemporary art told only by women artists, and all the works were ones that were in the collection of the Musée national d'art moderne (MNAM—the museum of the Centre Pompidou). The catalogue lists all of the women artists in the collection, naming in bold the impressive figure of 343 artists who were in the exhibition. *elles@centrepompidou* was also the longest exhibition: originally intended to be something over a year, it was extended to be a year and nine months, due to the extraordinary public response. During this time, there were two partial re-hangs swapping about one-fourth of the works on each occasion. The fact that all of the works came from the MNAM's own collection should not be remarkable, but it is. As the catalogue for *elles@centrepompidou* lists the date of purchase of works, it is possible to see that while MNAM bought a good amount of work by women in the time immediately leading up to the exhibition, it has also systematically bought work by women over many years. So while we can see that in the 2000s the museum was buying earlier works (for example, Niki de Saint Phalle's *Tir* of 1961, purchased in 2004, and a Nancy Spero drawing of 1967, also purchased in 2004), it is also possible to see that the museum has more often bought works within a decade of their creation. Even so, the curator Camille Morineau notes defensively that women artists "only comprise 18% of our collections and 25% of the contemporary collections"—although she later notes with surprise that "two great neighbouring museums, the Louvre and the Musée d'Orsay, exhibit works exclusively—or almost exclusively—by men" (15-16).

The opening sentence of the catalogue (similarly to that of *WACK!*, as noted above) is written by the head of the institution (Alain Seban) and situates "the transformation of the condition of women [as] a major economic, social and cultural fact" (Morineau 9), rather than a result of political engagement and struggle. The curatorial themes, at seven, are more manageable than the eighteen of *WACK!*, but like that exhibition, they combine the art historical, the material, and the social, but ironically also add the activist: *Pioneers*; *Free Fire*; *The Activist Body*; *Eccentric Abstraction*; *A Room of One's Own*; *Words at Work*; *Immatérielles* (Morineau 18). Morineau's curatorial approach as outlined in her essay differs from those of Butler, Arakistian, and Westen in significant ways. Her aim is not to define feminism, or the exhibition's relationship to feminism, or her own relationship to feminism. Rather, at the core of the essay is an attempt to explain what she terms "the French paradox" (Morineau 16): how can a political and cultural system that is based upon the concept of "égalité"—equality—acknowledge difference? How can women "take the floor" from which they have been excluded when they cannot do so structurally in the name of women? How can women argue for universalism by addressing difference? Morineau paraphrases historian Joan Scott's work on the "French paradox" when she writes of the MNAM: "Whatever the specifics of its exhibitions (and these have varied depending upon the period, because it is a museum of the present day), a museum concerned about equality within its collections has to argue against exclusion and for universalism by addressing women's difference—the very

difference which led to their exclusion in the first half of the century" (17). This in turn can prompt in the non-French reader the reflection that there is another layer of paradox for readers outside France: that to an extent not experienced in relation to other nationalities, "French feminism" has become a theoretical and cultural category (despite the often vitriolic differences between writers such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva), and that contemporary French philosophers in particular have developed the category of "difference" as an intellectual and political tool that has been of great use in developing feminist thinking.

While Morineau states that the selection of work from the collection "is as anthropological, sociological, and political as it is art historical", she is also at pains to deny that this is a feminist project: "The goal is neither to show that female art exists nor to produce a feminist event, but to present the public with a hanging that appears to offer a good history of twentieth-century art. The goal is to show that representation of women versus men is, ultimately, no longer important. Proving it is another matter" (16-17). And here is another paradox: much of the work in the exhibition focuses on being female—inhabiting a female body, a feminine cultural position, and/or a feminist political position. Even with works where a woman is in the image but the work is not overtly political (for example, in "Voices of Reason/Voices of Madness" (1984) by the Canadian, Geneviève Cadieux; or "Electric Dress" (1956, reconstituted 1999) by the Japanese Atsuko Tanaka; or "Lying with the Wolf" (2001) by the American Kiki Smith), the marked cultural construction of women's bodies (versus the 'neutral' or 'universal' or 'human' cultural construction of the bodies of men) overlaid with the gendered associations of particular representational tropes (in turn, hysteria; the traditional wedding dress; the sexually predatory attributes of the wolf in myths and tales) means that each of these works are available for deeply political readings. Further, certain curatorial decisions left the viewer with fruitfully frustrating and ambiguous readings of the various works. For example, in the section on design that focused on kitchens and dining, the curator had included a 1970s TV showing Martha Rosler's acerbically (and now iconically) feminist video "Semiotics of the Kitchen" (1975). One-activist-reading of this sly move would be that the anger represented by Rosler is enhanced by the work's enforced position in the kitchen; another-revisionist-reading might be that all Martha needed were these neglected women designers to make her domestic experiences happier. A third-anti-feminist-reading might be that the women designers were not neglected—they were in the collection of the MNAM, and some had had highly successful careers—and Rosler's piece was emotional and misplaced. In the case of all of these artworks, the specificity of the subject demonstrates that, contrary to her stated aim, Morineau had constructed an exhibition where representation of women versus men was, ultimately, central. Where the frustration lay for a feminist viewer of *elles@centrepompidou* was in the gap between, on the one hand, the assumption that simply 'being a woman' would be sufficient to make a coherent exhibition, and on the other hand the rejection of the category 'woman' in favour of the individualism inherent in the feminine plural "elles" (a grammatical construction that does not exist in—and is not readily translatable into—English). While the exhibition enjoyed an elegant and generous installation, the political thinking that could have filled that gap—the deconstruction of the category 'woman' and the production of new forms of representation—was missing. Instead, 'being a woman' was at times denied or (as in the placing of Rosler's video) was exposed as being an unresolved and unstable category, ready and waiting to undo the museological, archival, approach, but in the context de-historicised and de-politicised: feminism in limbo.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

So why is it important to think closely about how museums curate such exhibitions? There is an increasing tendency for museums to expand collections through donations from donors. Donors, of course, collect to their own loves, and to their own prejudices. The saga of the relationship between Eli Broad and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is an example of this: he is both a trustee of, and has loaned works to, LACMA. Broad's collection is notoriously light on women, but nonetheless is going to form a major part of what the public who go to LACMA will begin to understand as contemporary art—a series of exclusions that is deeply regressive. At the same time as the increase in donor-driven exhibitions, the museums that have put on these survey feminist exhibitions (or exhibitions of women artists) will be able to rest on their laurels. They will have 'been there, done that' and unless there has been a deep, political change in approaches to the collection and curation of contemporary art in these institutions, it may well be business as usual after those exhibitions. As Griselda Pollock asks:

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. Feminism is a *resource* for artistic practices, inflecting them and allying them with equally radical realignments within the art world at the conjunction with which a feminist effect became possible. As a repoliticization of gender and the cultural-semiotic enquiry into sexual difference, feminism made things possible within emerging forms and practices of expanded art practice post 1970. The price of not taking seriously this double process of changes in art making and art thought and of changes in social movements and political thought is that we assimilate and domesticate the feminist rupture into a deadened, museal category of "feminist art" while unthinkingly continuing ineffectually to add women artists to existing models of the history of art. (127)

For my students, born as many were around about 1990, the pioneering feminist work of the late '60s and the '70s is like art of the late '30s is for me: it is real art history. If today's young artists are to practice feminist resistance, they can learn from the successes and from the failures of earlier moments and movements of resistance. They need not the fixity of museal and archival categories, but unfixity.

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**Hilary Robinson** is Dean of the School of Art and Design and Professor of Visual Culture at Middlesex University, London. Her teaching and research focuses on feminist art theory, and publications include *Visibly Female: Women and Art Today* (1987); *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (2006); *Feminism-Art-Theory 1968-2014* (2015). She is currently working on a history of the feminist movement in art internationally. Hilary's academic career has been in Belfast, Northern Ireland; Pittsburgh PA, USA; and London, England. At the University of Ulster (1992-2005), she taught art theory to studio students. She became Research Co-ordinator and subsequently Head of School for Art & Design. She also gained her first Chair, as Professor of the Politics of Art. In 2005, Hilary was appointed Dean, College of Fine Arts and Professor of Art Theory and Criticism, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh. In Pittsburgh she was a board member of The Andy Warhol Museum; Quantum Theatre; Silver Eye Centre for Photography; Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council and The Mattress Factory. She headed the Creative Entrepreneurs research project, to retain artists in post-industrial Pittsburgh. She moved back to the UK to take up the deanship at Middlesex University. She is presently on the advisory and management boards for the AHRC-funded research project *Black Arts and Modernism*, led by Sonia Boyce.

Imprint  
Issue 29

**Publisher**

Dorothee Richter

**Editors**

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*Electric Ladyland*, 2016, detail © the artist

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**Proofreading**

Stephanie Carwin

**Web Design and Graphic Design Concept**

Ronald Kolb, Biotop 3000

**Graphic Design Issue 29**

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**Supported by**

Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK  
([www.curating.org](http://www.curating.org))

Institute for Cultural Studies in the Arts (ICS),  
Department of Cultural Analysis,  
Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK)

fCU, feminist Curators United  
([www.feministcurators.org](http://www.feministcurators.org))

Department of Art, University of Reading,  
Research Platform for Curatorial and Cultural Studies,  
Practice-Based Doctoral Programme

College of Arts and Humanities,  
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