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Curating feminism: the politics of blockbuster exhibitions

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TITLE SLIDE

Feminism meets the Big Exhibition: museum survey shows since 2005.

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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.

Some of the survey exhibitions were national.

Life Actually in Japan,

The Will as a Weapon, in Iceland, and

Dream and Reality in Turkey

Some were regional or cultural.

Gender Check explored art made in 24 eastern european countries over a period of 50 years;

La Costilla Maldita, focussed on Spanish-speaking artists from Europe and Latin America.

WACK! Kiss Kiss Bang Bang, and *REBELLE*, all aimed at an international representation of the movement.

Some were limited to particular timeframes (*WACK!* on the late '60's and the '70's, *Global Feminisms* was post 1990);

Both *Gender Check* and *Gender Battles* explored the construction and representation of sexual identity by both male and female artists.

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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. 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 being disciplined, defined, written, and canonized. Fourth, they all occupied major national or regional museums and galleries.

Thus, what has happened is that national or regional museums, institutions that are structurally central to the art world and most able to determine the definition and reach of categories in Art

History, and their most significant artists and art works, 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. They are determining an Art Historical category of 'Feminist Art' or 'Art by Women'. Eventually, the major trace of the exhibition will be in the catalogue, and what becomes clear from the catalogues is that each of the exhibitions had a further distinction, over and above the distinctions of location or chronology that I indicated. This is their definition of, and relationship to, feminism. While the word 'feminist' was 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 four of these exhibitions, through a focus on their catalogues.

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WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution.

The title of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* indicated that the art exhibited would not necessarily be feminist art; rather, it explored the relationships between art and what is termed (in the first sentence in the catalogue) the "social movement" of feminism.

In the first few lines of her catalogue essay, curator Cornelia Butler states her definition of feminism, quoting Peggy Phelan: "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". It is a curiously apolitical, non-activist definition. It also removes it from a chronology that Phelan laid out in her original text, written in 2001.

Butler goes on to situate her own first "interest in 1970s feminist art" in 1991-92 when she witnessed two catalysts for the formation of the Women's Action Coalition in New York. First was the way in which attention to Matthew Barney's breakthrough exhibition "virtually eclipsed several other simultaneous exhibitions featuring women artists" and 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. Her anecdotes indicate two things: first, a feminism that is interior to the frame of US (or New York) Art History, rather than a set of politics through which she analyzes the art world; and, second, 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.

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In total WACK! showed 119 artists in 18 different curatorial sections. These are categories of style, media, imagery, content, and intent. Reflecting Connie Butler's definition of feminism, they are surprisingly apolitical for a field that included so many activist individuals, groups, interventions, and artworks.

This approach is evident later in Butler's essay. Exclusions from exhibitions are always interesting, as they form the framework that determines the argument presented by the curator: they constitute its borders, its definition. Butler tells us why she excluded just one artist:

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Emily Kame Kngwarreye [...] was an Australian aboriginal artist who, during the 1970s, made textiles as part of the Utopia Women's Batik Group [...] Though [she] 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.

From a feminist perspective, this is a surprising statement. Feminist thinking has provided a 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' would be one that was compromised on numerous fronts, and western feminists from then till now have struggled over the re-contextualisation of works such as those by Kngwarreye. This includes direct challenges to, and circumvention of, the curatorial categories that produced such exclusions. Feminist artists and writers of the '70s analysed the mainstream exclusion of artists who were women, black, and/or non-European, and identified a different strategies that artists and curators could take. One of which was to set up woman-only structures. 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 by-passed the mainstream of the art world. The analysis – and eschewing – of patriarchal mainstream structures was a notable part of feminist practices in the 1970s. So I would argue that through this positioning of Kngwareye that *WACK!* is a 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.

SLIDE 7: installation shot of *WACK!* Work by Miraim Schapiro and Lynda Benglis.

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Kiss Kiss Bang Bang: 45 Years of Art and Feminism.

There is a great contrast between Connie Butler's curatorial catalogue essay, and that provided by Xabier Arakistain in the catalogue for *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. This exhibition opened three months after *WACK!*, and comprised "36 artists and three feminist groups from various countries" - much smaller than *WACK!* 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 45 years of work, in distinction from the 12 years covered by *WACK!*, *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* had five curatorial categories rather than *WACK!*'s eighteen. Arakistain describes them thus:

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- 1 *The fight for the civil and political rights of women.*
2. *The cultural construction of sex, gender and sexuality*
3. Struggles in 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.*

In contrast to *WACK!*'s more museological and art-world categories, all of these categories are directly related to political and activist themes central to feminist thought and the women's movement.

Throughout his essay, Arakistain is careful to avoid essentialising the category of 'Feminist Art', instead indicating how the category has been constructed historically. He argues that the calls for political and civil rights for women in the 1960s began to manifest themselves in art for the first time at that moment. 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, gender, 'race' and sexuality". 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. 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 Arakistain's choices.

SLIDE 10 Installation shot of *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. The exhibition is virtually invisible now online.

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REBELLE. Art and Feminism 1969-2009.

REBELLE opened in Arnhem, Holland in 2009, approximately two years after *WACK!* and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*.

It was an interestingly diverse exhibition. Of the 87 artists, 20 were either Dutch or living in Holland, giving local currency to the presentation. While there were just a handful of artists from the former Eastern bloc, Asia, or the Americas beyond the USA, 18 of the artists were from the

Middle East and Africa. Seven artists were represented by work dating from the 1960s, demonstrating that art was being made from a feminist position in a number of countries before the term 'feminist art' had been coined. However, the message that one got from this exhibition was not of nostalgia. Rather, although it was not arranged chronologically, it demonstrated a movement that is growing, vibrant, and with a lot of work still to do: 33 artists were represented solely with work made in or since 2000.

Westen's essay echoes Butler's and Arakistain's in providing overview, a personal history and process, and the curatorial themes of the exhibition, which she describes as five loose groups:

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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 the visitor walking around the exhibition was to contrast how different artists had approached these representational issues.

By the time *REBELLE* opened, MKKA already had a reputation for being supportive of work by women and of feminist work, as a result of the work of the earlier director Liesbeth Brandt Corstius, and the curator of contemporary art and of *Rebelle*, Mirjam Westen. Their depth of experience and feminist approach provided a rare environment – an institutional commitment to feminist thinking and processes as the norm. The catalogue follows a different track than those for *WACK!* or *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*. Rather than bringing together writers from different countries to comment on this historicizing moment, the five main essays in the catalogue are written by Dutch authors. Westen's aim was to "include less well-known voices, ... to particularize the history which has been written about in general terms elsewhere". The catalogue provides an account of an international movement from the point of view of a European country that is no longer a major global force, working in a minority language, which at the same time has been pioneering in its feminist thinking, structures, and art.

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The presence of artists from African and Arabic countries, Israel, Turkey, Iran, and some from Asia, demonstrated a set of feminist issues and languages that, although they may be newly visible in Europe or the USA, should not be equated with feminist work as it emerged in Western Europe and North America in the 70s. Feminism in *REBELLE* was not situated in a Western European/USA past, but in a broader state of becoming, and without a geographical centre 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. It was a curatorial approach that constructed

feminist processes as a set of local strategies and histories with comprehension of a growing global network.

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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 are ones from the collection of the Pompidou Centre. The catalogue lists all of the women artists in the collection, 343 of whom were in the exhibition.

The opening sentence of the catalogue (as with *WACK!*) is written by the male head of the institution and situates “the transformation of the condition of women [as] a major economic, social and cultural fact,” rather than a result of political engagement and struggle.

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The seven curatorial themes are more manageable than the 18 of *WACK!* but like *WACK!* they combine the Art Historical, the material, and the social, and also add the activist:

The approach that curator Camille Morineau outlines 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, or her own, relationship to feminism. Rather, the essay attempts to explain what she terms “the French paradox”: 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 writes: “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”.

Morineau is 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”. 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, and of course each of these works is available for deeply political readings. Further, certain curatorial decisions left the viewer with fruitfully ambiguous readings of the various works.

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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 feminist video 'Semiotics of the Kitchen'. 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 Pompidou, and some had had highly successful careers – and Rosler's piece was emotional and misplaced.

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Morineau had constructed an exhibition where representation of women versus men was, ultimately, central. The frustration for a feminist visitor 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 word 'elles' (a grammatical construction that does not exist in English). The insertion of wall texts, many of which quoted feminist statements, indicated a tantalising possibility: that there was also a gap between what could be inserted more ephemerally, and what was stated formally in the catalogue. But this was in the contextualisation of the works, not in the selection and juxtaposition of the works themselves. 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; potential, rather than realised.