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An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art in, of and from the feminine'

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Paint-Stripping

Feminist Possibilities in Painting After Modernism

Katy Deepwell

The assertion that to be a woman and just paint could constitute of itself a feminist statement has been rightly criticised since the 1970s as different theories of what constitutes feminist art practice and feminist cultural politics have developed and as the work of women artists of the past has been recovered. Painting, because it is popularly understood, taught and discussed as a vehicle for personal expression, when linked to a common understanding of women as speaking out or giving voice to perspectives which are in opposition to men's or different, suggests a feminist potential. As feminist critiques of the novel have shown however, there are feminist novels and women's novels. A woman writing cannot automatically be regarded as producing feminist work or offering a feminist perspective on the world.

Contrary to popular belief, painting is not a transparent medium of communication: like language, it is heavily coded and conventionalised. Its methods of production, distribution and consumption and the (re)production of its traditions are not neutral or objective means which affirm only the great and the good of past and present. Its selective canon, its advocacy of particular role models are the result of choices, selections determined by and regularly reinvested in, albeit with shifting configurations of social, political and economic values. In spite of the diversity of claims made for and against painting: for its ability to represent either a window on the world or a spiritual autonomous realm; for its political significance as an embodiment of shared cultural value (its role as propaganda) or for the specificities of a visual/private language, painting has not been divorced from politics. The internal strategies of the practices of painting merge with the politics of exhibition, criticism, and the work of dealers, markets, curators and collectors. Modernism

claims its founding moment in the break from the Academy in a critique of the institution of art. Yet each successive modernist movement became part of the establishment at the moment the latest new break from its very own traditions was declared. Despite the fact that the “death” of painting in the twentieth century has frequently been declared by avantgarde artists, the endless renegotiations of painting as a practice and its mediations by the art market, auction houses and museums continue. What, then, is at stake in this continuous reinvestment?

Unbound: Possibilities in Painting, an exhibition organised at the Hayward Gallery, London, 3 March-30 May 1994, aimed to present possibilities for painting which represented a ‘breaking of bounds’ with modernism: that is, the possibilities for painting after the reductive modernist theorisations of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. For all the dubious claims of its curator, Adrian Searle, himself a painter and now *The Guardian* (London)’s art critic, that the exhibition represented an ‘intuitive and open-ended view’, there were many closures. The selection of only three women amongst fourteen artists to illustrate individualist contributions to what could constitute new possibilities was part of the problem. The arguments advanced by the catalogue did not even begin to analyse the power stakes within the debates about the endgame of modernism or the advent of postmodernism. They did not deal adequately with postmodernism’s declared arrival in the visual arts which reinvested in a “return to painting and sculpture” in the late 1970s and early 1980s only to be rapidly challenged by the strategies of resistance offered by the ‘anti-aesthetic’ (Hal Foster’s term), or the renewed interest in conceptualism in mainstream international exhibitions.

The melancholy which Searle expressed for the loss of the seeming certainties of modernism was all too apparent in his definition of postmodernism as representing ‘too much leakage’. A phrase which implies that most of the features strongly associated with postmodernism - the use of psychoanalytic methods after Freud i.e. those derived from Lacan, to read works; poststructuralist theories of language in terms of intertextuality, discourse, or play and jouissance; and any debates about context, history or politics - represent a corruption of the only relevant space, the only boundary in which it is possible to act: the blank stretched canvas defined by Greenbergian modernism. Searle is prepared to concede one item from the postmodern agenda; its characterisation of the 1970s as pluralist. However, even this concession is carefully marked and delimited: the map of modernism as a successive linear progression of historically timeless moments of greatness (the golden torch theory) is replaced by the recognition that there are now different tendencies simultaneously exploring the modernist heritage. Oppositional or resistant strategies remain excluded in his account, for the communities and practitioners who have good reason to question this narrow, if dominant, version of modernism which was institutionalised as ‘the tradition of modern art’ by the 1940s and 1950s are not mentioned. Interestingly, it is only the abstract painting/

installation pieces of Jessica Stockholder and the parodic gesturing of Fiona Rae's abstract paintings which are given any potentially postmodern status by Searle amongst his selected artists.

The majority of Searle's arguments repeat many old modernist tropes: for example, how, with the introduction of photography, painting abandoned representation and began to explore the means of painting. The totalising, internationalist, heroic march towards purity, abstraction and the autonomy of art is presented as if it were the only project of the avant garde within the twentieth century, thus neatly side-stepping any engagement with realism, the theories of representation, vanguard challenges to the 'institution of art' or critiques of modernist historicism. The argument jumps from the practices initiated in the late 1950s to the late 1970s as if pop art, minimalism, conceptualism or feminist art practice never happened. The re-introduction of representation, of figuration, can then be positioned as but one measure of the move away from modernism (towards postmodernism) but the only marker is the macho / nihilistic work of the Neo-Geo-Expressionists (presumably David Salle and Julian Schnabel, Hodge and Rainer Fetting rather than the more politically engaged projects of Gerhard Richter or Anselm Kiefer) and Benito Oliva's Italian Transavantgarde (Chia, Clemente and Cucchi). This makes the selection of the figurative/narrative painter, Paula Rego, in spite of her reputation in Britain, all the more bizarre as the only figurative artist in the exhibition.

The central problem in Searle's arguments for the catalogue is the way 'painting' is defined as a unified category. This perpetuates a reductive conception of modernist painting as the formalist manoeuvres of paint upon a canvas (of any medium upon a support) invented by the body of the painter. This limits any discussion of postmodernism to an empty re-introduction of the referent, a neo-conservative playful and ahistorical re-investment with already codified and established 'styles'. Although there is a nodding recognition, via a quote from Thomas McEvilley offered in the catalogue, that a 'postmodernist exhibition' would mix the former boundaries and limits and thus avoid 'both the absolutism of presence (essence) and that of absence (emptiness)...the corrupt zone of intersection, mediation and cross-pollution', but this is reduced only to the scepticism and irony of replaying already established modernist formulas.

The problematic status of painting, after the institutionalisation of modernism in the 1940s, is an important question particularly for women artists. Women painters may have been marginalised by modernism as an institutionalised discourse within the burgeoning culture industry but they have been far from absent from modernist practice e.g. Gabriele Muntz, Eileen Agar, Leonora Carrington, Georgia O'Keefe, Joan Mitchell, Nikki de Saint-Phalle's shot paintings, Bridget Riley, Agnes Martin, Gillian Ayres to name just a few. Feminists have researched, questioned, and critiqued established practices in modernism and highlighted it as a contested field, while working to counteract the exclusions of women from institutions. Such

approaches have included Lucy Lippard's conviction in the 1970s that feminism's greatest contribution to the vitality of contemporary art has been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism,¹ to Mary Kelly's arguments that feminism contests the materiality, sociality and sexuality of modernism,² to the many critiques of the institutional exclusions which modernism has perpetuated to maintain a culture dominated by DWEM's (dead white Euro-American males).

Women artists did not stop painting in the early 1970s and some constituencies amongst the plurality of painting practices have made claims for feminist possibilities in painting, even as the majority of feminist art practice(s) became identified with work in mixed media, film, video, performance and scripto-visual works and now in postmodernist discourse with strategies of resistance. Denunciations of painting as a corrupt bourgeois commodity and an outmoded negatively-loaded media for women were particularly resonant in the 1970s when the art object was 'de-materialised' and the commodification of the art object, its sites and values involved in its production, distribution and consumption repeatedly brought into question. However, work on theories of representation and interest in rewriting myths from a feminist perspective moved discussion about painting away from the notion of 'personal' expression and towards theories of communication, analyses of the signifying field and a critique of the politics of representation.

Postmodern debates have identified feminist practice in photography, performance and mixed media as central to Hal Foster's conception of an anti-aesthetic, a neo- or post-conceptualist wing of postmodernism in the visual arts and it is here that strategies of resistance are positioned. Susan Rubin Suleiman has argued that postmodernism is the first avantgarde movement in which the work of women, specifically feminists, has been central, providing a political guarantee for post-modernist/post-structuralist claims to critique logocentric and Eurocentric thought.³ Suleiman's point echoes Craig Owens' often-quoted arguments of a relationship between the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation and language in the work of New York-based artists, Mary Kelly, Laurie Anderson, Martha Rosler, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger.⁴ Painting practices, specifically the 'Neo-Geo' or any 'return to narrative/ figurative painting and sculpture' is all too quickly positioned as the opposite tendency - neo-conservative and as reinforcing the machinations of the art market as cultural industry/ commodity-based market in the cosy acceptance of an empty unchallenging pseudo avantgarde philosophy useful only as another marketing strategy. As John Roberts has suggested, painting practice is frequently either fetishised as a release from the cognitive and political or dematerialised as being outside the possibilities for any form of cultural intervention.⁵ So where does this leave the question of possibilities for feminist painting post-Modernism or are we still negotiating our way out of modernism? Doesn't this depend on how the legacy of late modernist painting is understood and what position feminists adopt in relation to it?

Griselda Pollock has recently sought to map the relationships of (modernist) painting, feminism and history in their problematic relationship with three orders of space: the social space of art's production; the symbolic space of the art object and its statement; and finally, the space of representation in which social and sexual hierarchies are figured.⁶ Women painters, she argues, must necessarily operate in the strategic field delineated by these three orders: specifically 'the painter's body', the feminine body and the contestation of both through feminist discourse and the practice of the woman's body. Her account foregrounds a politics of representation in her discussion of Lubaina Himid's work and a critique of 'presence' in modernist painting through a consideration of Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler and the continuation of their project in the work of Gillian Ayres. She is insistent however that feminism is not about women's claims to be the body of the painter nor is it an art-world feminism where women adopt the isolation of studio practice.

Pollock is also rightly critical of the ways in which the question for feminism about aesthetic practices has appeared to be reduced to a simple set of oppositional choices for or against painting as opposed to scripto-visual work. As she suggests: 'Feminism...provides a theory of interventions within a field of signification, rather than an alibi for female expressivity..(or) women's equal right to the 'body of the painter''.⁶ However, if what is at stake in feminist interventions in the field of significations is not to be reduced to choice of medium it is equally the case that transformative work on the codes and conventions does not exclude the possibility of transformation in or using painting as one of a number of possible visual resources.

In the mid eighties, John Roberts identified three feminist approaches to painting and sexual difference: firstly, the anti-painting argument where painting in its late modernist and social realist variants is regarded as a double obstacle to the specificities of the representation of gender; secondly, the anti-functional argument, painting as a radical resource for women, linking up bodily experience with a distinct female aesthetic or 'visual economy' and thirdly, the female centred approach, defending the descriptive powers of the figurative tradition as the basis for a feminist narrative or mythological painting.⁷ Feminist debates about painting still largely fall into these three categories.

The modernist and romantic/idealist (psychic) fantasy of total self-expression, or the freedom of acting out across the surface of the canvas - and the signification of the gesture as a mark of the painter's presence/ psychic expression - upon which many anti-painting arguments have been constructed, remains a powerful fantasy because of its reproduction in the art school where modernism remains a dominant practice as well as an object of study and feminist theory is marginalised. Griselda Pollock has recently criticised this, from a Lacanian perspective, because of the ways in which it serves a regressive fantasy - 'the moment when the proto-subject first imagines itself unified.'⁶ This powerful fantasy of a unified subjectivity which can

freely express itself, she argues, while shared by both men and women, is one which is shattered by the entry into the Symbolic which inevitably organises trajectories in the social-political-symbolic order for men and women.

The overwhelming interest in the work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray from contemporary women painters, who wish to re-read the phallic symbolic, to renegotiate and even parody the legacy of modernism (like Fiona Rae or Laura Godfrey-Isaacs), make it clear that women are not prepared to accept the psychosocial closure offered by Lacan's formulation of the Symbolic. Nor is it clear that this regressive fantasy (in Modernism) is one which has served women's activities as Modernist painters as the example of the shifting investments of Lee Krasner as painter/women in both practice and person might indicate: known as both Mrs Jackson Pollock and as LK, as 'good pupil of Hans Hoffman' and reclaimed as a feminist painter and survivor in the seventies.⁸

The desire of women painters to explore the Imaginary as a pre-symbolic space is, on occasion, justified as a disruption, a chora, to the phallic symbolic order. Similarly women painters working in abstract modes have put forward readings of their work as explorations of the woman's body, as valuing touch/textuality, bodily wastes, excess fluidity - a reading of feminine difference (*écriture féminine*) potentially constructed against the Symbolic order. Women painting in abstract modes and employing French feminist theory (as diverse in their projects as Avis Newman, Therese Oulton or the artists who participated in the 1992 *(Dis)parities* exhibition at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield) rarely interrogate or critique the principles which they claim to espouse. Irigaray's own writing of a feminine imaginary positioned outside the role of vision / the look which determines sexuality or Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' or the powers of the chora as 'disruptive' are frequently invoked in criticism as an alibi to old modernist practices, without regard to these women's own writing on feminist politics or painters or the status of optics in psychoanalysis. All too often psychoanalytic theory appears dragged in at the last minute, a theoretical adjunct to 'reading' practice which continues in modernist modes as explorations of the body of 'universal' woman / radical woman painter. Kristeva and Irigaray have been used as a new means to argue a 'feminist' case for value in the feminine, in women's already over determined position as 'Other' and as an attempt to radicalise any mark of feminine difference. The re-investments made in abstraction by women painters which are ambiguously reclaimed as feminine/feminist instances mistakenly associate a recovery of texture/tactility/facture as a textual strategy for writing the feminine body from the position of the woman's body as painter. My criticism of this strategy is that it repeats the formula invested in the existing social/psychic symbolic order without effecting any disruption of the binary oppositions which structure this status quo. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, post-structuralist thought frequently presents itself as a different means to re-engage with modernist works, to think about it differently,

but it has not provided a basis for discussion of postmodernism in the visual arts.⁹ This criticism can easily be applied when considering the claims for the feminist radicalism of such work when it is so thoroughly invested within modernist tradition. The attachment of these theories to certain forms of practice often fails to acknowledge - and perhaps seemingly reproduce - the ambiguities of the political positions of the same theorists towards feminism. The same cannot be said for painter and psychoanalyst Bracha Lictenberg Ettinger, however, whose painting practice contributes to and acts as a means to renegotiate her own theoretical work on a 'matrixial space' which emerges out of an extensive critique which refuses to limit the 'only' symbolic order to Lacan's Phallic Symbolic.

On another level the exclusion of figurative artists from discussions of painting after modernism does not sit well with previous feminist exhibition strategies. Figurative women painters have been included in major feminist exhibitions - *Women's Images of Men* (ICA, London, 1980), *Painting is the Issue* (Rochdale Art Gallery, UK, 1986), *Along the Lines of Resistance* (Arts Council of Great Britain touring exhibition, 1988) - and their work has been read as communicating feminist ideas and as engaging with feminist critiques of representation e.g. Margaret Harrison *Rape* (1978); Monica Sjoo *God Giving Birth*; Sutapa Biswas' *Housewives with Steak-Knives*; or Deanna Petherbridge's *Themata* series (1989); Sherrie Levine's works reproducing Ludwig Kirchner's paintings; Sue William's *It's a New Age* or Ida Applebroog's *Marginalia* painting/installation series. While all of these works use the medium of painting not one of these works is about the rehabilitation of presence or pure unmediated expression of the artist, in fact most operate as critiques of these very notions. The forms codes and theories of signification employed, the contexts in which they were seen, shown and discussed similarly cannot be homogenised back into a unified category maintained and policed by modernist painting nor can they be seen as a desire to reproduce 'painting' as the uncritical expressive product of a humanist unified subject 'giving voice'. Each of the artists named above would lay claim to represent a feminist position, though much could be said about the character and politics of their representations with regard to feminist politics, narratives and myths. It is also clear that these disparate works are not about re-investing in 'painting' as a nihilistic play of empty postmodern referents.

Although there are marked shifts suggested by the work of some practitioners to rearrange the 'visual economy' set by a modernist agenda and which might alter the overview Roberts constructed in the mid-1980s, the critical debate has so far not maintained its necessary engagement with current practice and interrogated the claims put forward. The challenge to late modernist painting and its mythologies from feminism remains: how to produce an effective set of feminist possibilities in painting without re-instating the purity of painting or re-investing again in its overblown status remains the issue.

Notes

1. Lucy Lippard 'Sweeping Exchanges' *Art Journal* (1980) Vol 41 No. 1/2
2. Mary Kelly 'Reviewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* (1981) Vol 22 No 3 and in B.Wallis *Rethinking Representation: Art After Modernism* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/Godine,1984)
3. Susan Suleiman 'Feminism and Postmodernism: A question of Politics' in Charles Jencks (ed) *A Postmodern Reader*
4. Craig Owens 'The Discourse of Others' in Hal Foster (ed) *Postmodern Culture* (Pluto,1984)
5. John Roberts 'Fetishism, Conceptualism, Painting' *Art Monthly* (Dec-Jan 1984-5)
6. Griselda Pollock 'Painting, Feminism and History' in A.Phillips & M.Barratt *Destabilising Theory* (Polity,1992)
7. John Roberts *Postmodernism and Cultural Politics* (Verso) ; see also Katy Deepwell 'In Defence of the Indefensible: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism' *Feminist Art News* (1987) No.2 and Rosa Lee 'Resisting Amnesia: Feminism , Painting and Postmodernism' *Feminist Review* (1987) No.26
8. Ann Wagner 'Lee Krasner as LK' in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard *The Expanding Discourse* (New York: Harper Collins,1992)
9. Andreas Huyssen 'Mapping the Postmodern' in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York, Routledge,1990)

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Gibt es Noch Themen in der Zeitgenoissischen Kunst? Und Welche interessieren Kunstlerinnen heute?

Annelise Zwez

Präambel zum Thema Internet

Online-Texte müssen ihre spezifische Form noch finden. Internet ist weder ein schriftliches noch ein mündliches Medium. Die Briefform scheint mir eine Möglichkeit, denn sie ist unmittelbare Mitteilung und Reflexion in einem.

Liebe Katy

Du warst spontan begeistert als ich Dir vorschlug für n.paradoxa darüber nachzudenken, mit was für Themen sich Künstlerinnen heute beschäftigen. Beide sind wir überzeugt, dass sich so Wesentlicheres über die Kunst von Frauen aussagen lässt, als über die ewigen Zahlen und Klagen über Nichtberücksichtigungen, Nichtankäufe, Untervertretungen....von Werken von Künstlerinnen. Und gleichzeitig waren wir uns einig, dass die Frage primär der Beschäftigung mit Themenbereichen gelten soll und nicht dem Vergleich mit ähnlichen Motiven bei Künstlern.

Je mehr ich mich in die Arbeit vergrub, desto spannender wurde die Fragestellung. "Die Welt ist doch das Thema der Kunst", reagierte eine Schweizer Museumsdirektorin etwas verwundert über den Ansatz meiner Recherchen. Gewiss, aber Blickwinkel sind immer geprägt von Geschichten. Historischen, geographischen, sozialen, generationenmässigen, geschlechtsspezifischen Geschichten. Die letztgenannten sind die umstrittensten, weil sie Geschlecht zur Kategorie machen, weil sie Geschlecht mit Sexualität und traditionell "zweitrangigen" Lebensaufgaben gleichsetzen. Frau ist bekanntlich mehr. Dennoch hoffe ich, es kommt nie der Tag, da es die bewusste Sicht der Frau (und ebenso des Mannes) nicht mehr gibt, denn dann wären wir alle Neutras.

Das Loch an der Biennale Venedig

Geschichten verändern sich. Schriebe ich diesen Text um 1980 würde ich zweifellos versuchen, weibliche Themen einzukreisen und diese den männlichen gegenüberzustellen. Möglichst schwarz/weiss. Die Kunst von Frauen der Zeit gäbe mir reichlich Nahrung für einen solchen Ansatz. Valie Export, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold, Marina Abramovic, Louise Bourgeois, Miriam Cahn. Der Körper wäre das Generalthema. Das Ich des weiblichen Körpers als Symbol für das Kollektiv Frau. Es kann hier nicht darum gehen, dieses bereits geschichtliche Thema aufzuarbeiten, obwohl das eigentlich dringend notwendig wäre. Denn die Wut, dass Jean Clair die Venezianer Biennale-Ausstellung Körper - Identità - Alterità konzipiert hat ohne die Sprengkraft der damaligen Auseinandersetzung der Künstlerinnen mit dem Thema gültig aufzuzeigen, sitzt mir immer noch in den Knochen.

Die vier Stufen des Selbstbewusstseins

Geschichten verändern sich. Bis in die späten 80er Jahre sind eigentlich nur drei Gruppen von Künstlerinnen tätig.

Erstens: Die geistig in der Zeit vor 1968 verharrenden, die sich nicht davon lösen können, Arbeiten gut zu finden, wenn sie "gerade so gut von einem Mann sein könnten". Vielleicht sind sie gerade darum oft nur mittelmässig.

Zweitens: Die in traditionell weiblichen Techniken (Textil, Papier, Keramik und andere Materialien) verharrenden, die zwar unter der Diskriminierung ihres Schaffens als minderwertiges "Kunsth Handwerk" leiden, sich aber nicht aus dem Schutz des Ghettos "Frauenkunst" zu lösen vermögen und auch keine erneuerten Material-/Motiv-/Technikansätze wagen.

Drittens: Die von den 68er Jahren (für Amerika müsste man wahrscheinlich sagen die 60er Jahre) geprägten, für welche die Entwicklung und der Einsatz eines Selbstbewusstseins als Frau wesentliche Antriebsfeder für ihre künstlerischen Äusserungen und ihren Auftritt in der Kunstszene sind. Und zwar unabhängig davon ob ihre Motive, Techniken, Arbeitsmethoden das Moment "Frau" direkt oder indirekt thematisieren. Aus dieser grössten Gruppe kommen die wichtigsten Werke von Künstlerinnen von Mitte der 60er Jahre bis in die späten 80er Jahre.

In der zweiten Hälfte der 80er Jahre kommt eine vierte Gruppe hinzu: Künstlerinnen, die entweder aufgrund ihrer Jugendlichkeit oder ihrer Entwicklung ein Selbstbewusstsein in sich tragen, das sich nicht auf das Geschlecht bezieht. Sie haben die Opferrolle abgelegt und kämpfen aus einer, nicht immer leicht zu haltenden, individuellen Balance ihrer weiblichen und männlichen Anteile kompromisslos für ihre Sicht auf die Welt; Rückschläge eingeschlossen. Dass ihre Themen gerade darum sehr oft verschiedene materielle und geistige Ebenen vernetzen, die Egalität des einen und des anderen betonen oder die Ironie zu Hilfe nehmen, um die immer noch nicht bewältigte Geschichte der Geschlechter ad

absurdum zu führen, kann nicht verwundern. Sie bestimmen die Frauen-Kunstszene heute wesentlich mit.

So wenig wie eine Gruppenzugehörigkeit immer eindeutig ist, so wenig ist sie in einem engeren Sinne generationengebunden. Gerade in den 70er Jahren gab es zahlreiche Künstlerinnen, die quasi eine Generation übersprangen und als ältere Frauen "junge" Künstlerinnen wurden oder erst dann in ihrer Bedeutung erkannt wurden. Andererseits gibt es aber auch heute immer noch Künstlerinnen, die im Elfenbeinturm darauf warten, vom Prinzen geküsst zu werden und beleidigt sind, wenn er sich weigert.

Aus der Not, der Wut, der Lust geboren - was Louise Bourgeois mit den Bad Girls verbindet und von ihnen trennt

Geht man davon aus, dass heute Künstlerinnen tätig sind, die ihre entscheidenden Jugendprägungen zwischen 1940 und 1990 erfahren haben, so wird klar, dass alle vier Gruppen nach wie vor präsent sind, das heisst für eine thematische Untersuchung auch, dass die von Künstlerinnen bearbeiteten Themen immer sehr verschiedene Zeitoptiken in sich tragen, die sich oft kurios durchmischen.

Man betrachte einmal den Unterschied zwischen Louise Bourgeois und den "Bad Girls". Das Werk von Louise Bourgeois (geb. 1911) ist emotional von ihren Kindheitserlebnissen in einer Familie mit Mutter, Vater und der Geliebten des Vaters geprägt. Die geschlechtsgegebene Identifikation mit der Mutter (vgl. Carol Gilligan) hat ein Trauma bezüglich der Sprengkraft männlicher Sexualität erzeugt. Ihre Messerpenisse, ihre vielbrüstigen Objekte, ihre geladenen "Memento mori" - "Folterkammern" wurzeln in der beklemmenden, zuweilen sadistischen, manchmal auch verführerischen Auseinandersetzung mit dem Unheil stiftenden, väterlichen Geschlecht.

Trotzdem wäre es einseitig, ihre Werke nur unter diesem Gesichtspunkt zu sehen, denn die Qualität eines künstlerischen Ausdrucks ist zwingend gekoppelt mit der Kraft der Umsetzung des treibenden Themas, welcher Art auch immer. Und Qualität ist immer auch Vieldeutigkeit, das Umschlagen des Individuellen, Privaten in spiegelbildliche, allgemeingültige Ebenen. Louise Bourgeois ist eine grossartige Künstlerin. Sie hat, wahrscheinlich als erste überhaupt, das Thema Sexualität aus ihrer subjektiven Sicht als Frau schonungslos ausformuliert. Aber sie ist in dem Sinne generationsgebunden als das Phänomen der Untreue des Vaters über die characterspezifische Reaktion der Künstlerin hinaus eine der Zeit entsprechende ist und als Kunst aus tiefster Not geboren wurde.

Phalli und Vaginas

Ganz anders die meist in den 60er Jahren geborenen Bad Girls und ihnen nahestehende Künstlerinnen, die sich mit Lust, Witz und hintergründiger Ironie tabulos mit weiblicher Sexualität, mit Identität und Austauschbarkeit der Geschlechter auseinandersetzen. Ihre Werke stehen formal und inhaltlich, seltener

technisch, in direktem Bezug zum Werk von Louise Bourgeois. Aber ihr Ansatz ist ein völlig anderer. Sie spielen mit der weiblich-erotischen Körperlichkeit, hängen Brüste als Wachsobjekte an die Wand, blasen Arschbacken auf und verziern sie mit Sammetbändchen, zeichnen ihre Lustregungen unter die Röcke, machen Onanieren zur Performance, verwandeln Penisse in Kerzenständer, kastrieren junge Männer mit Pinsel und Stift, häkeln Phalli und Vaginas, verwandeln die mit Urin in den Schnee gebrannten Löcher in Blümchenfelder. Sie arbeiten auf der Basis von Video und Fotografie mit den Möglichkeiten der computergesteuerten Manipulation, suhlen im Blut digitaler Rottöne, fügen Brüste und Geschlechtsmerkmale unterschiedlicher Grösse und Potenz ein oder löschen sie weg, machen Babies mit Männermündern zu Sexobjekten.... Sie treiben das alte Phänomen, dass Männer ihre sexuellen Gefühle als Projektionen auf den weiblichen Körper darstellen, während die Frauen ihre Sexualität am eigenen Körper zeigen, auf die Spitze und führen die Männer (und sich selbst) lustvoll - aber manchmal auch sehr banal - an der Nase herum.

Out: die Frau als Lustobjekt für den Mann

Um das Thema einzukreisen, darf die mittlere, die klassisch- feministische Generation nicht ausser Acht gelassen werden, die aus echter Geschlechteraufbäumung heraus die Rolle der Frau im Bild des Mannes vom Sockel stiess und damit Grundlegendes in Gang setzte:

Die Bedeutung und die Anerkennung, die Louise Bourgeois heute geniesst, wurde zu Beginn ganz klar von Frauen aufgebaut, welche die geschlechtsspezifische Dimension dieses Werkes erkannten. Die Radikalität und Aggressivität, mit welcher Louise Bourgeois das Thema vorführte, packte aber bald auch die Männer, die sich hier - vielleicht erstmals in der Kunst - in ihrer eigenen Körperlichkeit (der vielverdrängten) thematisiert sahen.

Es ist die Stärke von Louise Bourgeois - man findet sie analoog auch im Werk von Jenny Holzer - dass sie ihr Thema nicht anklägerisch formuliert, sondern aus sich heraus erstehen lässt und damit zum offenen Gefäss macht. Anders sehr oft die erste feministische Generation, die das Leiden am Mann klar und klagend aufdeckt, damit bei den Männern (begrifflicherweise) auf wenig Gegenliebe stösst und von der patriarchalen Kunstszene weitgehend verdrängt wird. Dennoch bewirkte ihre Präsenz und ihre Kraft, dass es Männern weniger und weniger möglich wird, ihre sexuellen Phantasien über den weiblichen Körper in ihre Kunst einzubringen. Mit zwei Resultaten:

Arbeiten die Bad Girls den Männern in die Hand?

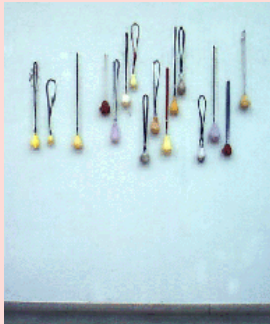
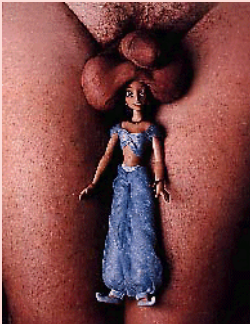
Was ist geschlechts- und was ist rollenspezifisch?

Das Thema "Körper" wird in den 90er Jahren erneut zu einem Generalthema, weil den Künstlern nun nichts mehr anderes übrig bleibt als sich endlich mit sich

selbst auseinanderzusetzen. Für die 68er Frauen, die das längst abgehakt haben - wenn auch ihrer Geschichte gemäss in anderer Form - kann das zuweilen langweilig sein; es gibt unter den jungen Künstlerinnen, insbesondere in den USA, aber auch vor allem auf der Foto- und Videoebene - neue Ansätze. Es bringt aber auch mit sich, dass die stark auf Sexualität ausgerichteten Bad Girls, in der Meinung ihre eigene Lust endlich mit grenzenloser Phantasie - und nicht aus innerer Not - auszuleben, jenen Männern in die Hand arbeiten, die sich schon immer an sexuellen Reizen in weiblicher Verkleidung erregten und sie hier in einer Geilheit vorfinden, die sie bisher nur von ihrer Phantasie her kannten. (Da liegt wohl auch der internationale Erfolg des Bad Girlism.)

Dieses paradoxe Phänomen ist nicht grundsätzlich neu, umgekehrt gibt es das schon lange. Die Tatsache, dass die Frauen nie opponiert haben gegen ihre nackte Präsenz in der Kunst, hat damit zu tun, dass sie - Erotik im eigenen Körper suchend - die Entstehungsgeschichte der "Akte" ausblendeten und die Männer-Projektionen zu ihren eigenen Identifikationen machten. Man denke zum Beispiel an die erotischen Zeichnungen von Gustav Klimt, an die Posen, welche seine Modelle - ihm zur "künstlerischen" Lustbefriedigung - einnehmen mussten; eine sexistische Geschichte par excellence. Aber, wie in jeder Ausstellung dieser Zeichnungen zu sehen ist, geniessen die Frauen den Anblick der erotischen Verrenkungen unverhohlen und mit regungsreicher Lust.

Bevor ich zu einem weiteren Thema schreite, ist noch eine Anmerkung notwen. Fragen wir uns kurz, wie Frauen auf Ausstellungen mit Visualisierungen ausgeprägt männlicher Sexualität reagieren. Wir finden diese im Umfeld des Expressionismus der 80er Jahre. Sie lösen - aggressiv wie sie daherkommen - kaum Lustempfinden aus, sondern meist das Gegenteil. In der verwandelten oder neuaufgegriffenen männlichen Körperlichkeit der 90er Jahre hingegen, die sich dem Thema zum Teil zerstörend oder auflösend, zum Teil aber auch zärtlich nähert, kann sich - vor allem im letzteren Bereich - die Empfindung wandeln. Das bedeutet, dass die obengenannten Beobachtungen im Kern nicht geschlechtsspezifische sind, sondern mit der Rollengeschichte von Mann und Frau zu tun haben.



Left : Keith Boadwee (USA):
"Jasmine Swami" - Die *"Bad Girls"*
 als Trendsetter. Fotoarbeit.
 Right : Bessie Nager
Brüste als Lust-Objekte aus Gips
Beton und Leder (Foto:
 Kunsthaus:Glarus,Switzerland)

Warum hat das (eigene) Kind keinen Platz in der Kunst von Frauen?

Ein anderes Thema spricht - aus europäischer Sicht - durch seine schmale Präsenz in der Kunst von Frauen heute: "Kind" und "Familie". In der männlich-europäischen Kunstgeschichte kommt das Thema Familie in tausend Idyllen immer wieder vor. Und als "Pietà" ist "Mutter und Kind" eines der meistgemalten Motive der Bild-Geschichte überhaupt. In der jüngeren Kunst europäischer Frauen gibt es das Thema hingegen nur ausnahmsweise. Dies ist umso erstaunlicher als in Amerika Kunst als gesellschaftsbezogene, soziale Struktur gerade zu diesem Thema breit hinterfragt wird. Oft soweit, dass nicht einmal die eigene Identität, das eigene Geschlecht als etwas Gegebenes wahrgenommen wird.

Mehr als im Thema "Sexualität" kommen hier rollenspezifische "Traumas" zum Ausdruck. Gebären oder Nichtgebären ist ein existentielles Thema jeden Frauenlebens. Und dennoch erscheint es in der europäischen Kunst praktisch nicht (zumindest nicht künstlerisch relevant) oder es ist in eine virtuelle Spielzeugwelt transferiert. Da findet ganz offensichtlich Verdrängung statt. Der Beruf der Künstlerin ist für Frauen erzwungenermassen so stark mit dem Verzicht auf Familie - allenfalls sogar feste Partnerschaft - verbunden, dass Ueberleben nur mit der Ausklammerung des Themas "Kind" möglich ist. Sich in der Kunstszene hocharbeiten bedingt Bewegungsfreiheit; Familie bedeutet aber meist Ortsgebundenheit. Da offenbart sich in der Kunst ein unbewältigtes Stück Emanzipation, das mit der starken Internationalisierung der Kunst in den letzten Jahren grösser denn je geworden ist (und daselbst oft auch die Künstler vor Gretchenfragen stellt).

Das Interessante ist, dass auch nur wenige Künstlerinnen, die Kinder haben, das Thema aufgreifen. Denn dieses ist rollenspezifisch derart negativ besetzt, mit dem vermeintlich abgeschütteln, traditionellen Frauenbild so eng verknüpft, dass es die Künstlerinnen weder negativ noch positiv aufgreifen wollen. Das heisst nicht etwa, dass Künstlerinnen Kinder weniger gerne haben als andere Frauen, aber das Thema ist persönlichkeitsmässig unbewältigt und darum einem Vakuum gleich. Es kommt hinzu, dass Künstlerinnen-Mütter so viel Kraft aufwenden müssen, um die beiden gegenläufigen Verpflichtungen gleichzeitig zu leben, dass sie - endlich im Atelier - die andere Seite ihres Lebens begreiflicherweise möglichst verbannen. Es gibt ja tatsächlich nicht nur dieses Thema in der Welt.

Stolze Mütter, Babies am Rockzipfel

Spannend ist es, zu sehen, wie das Motiv aufscheint, wo es trotz allem Eingang in weiblich-künstlerische Bild- und Denkwelten findet. Zum Beispiel bei der 46jährigen Amerikanerin Jenny Holzer, Mutter einer ca. 10jährigen Tochter. Sie hat sich in einem ihrer suggestiven Schriftzyklen mit dem Thema "Mutter und Kind" auseinandergesetzt und zwar äussert fraubewusst und ohne jegliches Verdrängungsmoment: "A man can't know what it is like to be a mother" heisst es da zum Beispiel.

Auch bei der 43jährigen, in Südafrika aufgewachsenen Holländerin Marlène Dumas, Mutter einer siebenjährigen Tochter, erscheint das Thema mit jener Mischung aus Liebe und Stolz, die alle Mütter kennen. Marlène Dumas hat den Geschlechterkampf, die Liebessehnsucht, die Sexualität und die Schwangerschaft immer äusserst direkt und ungefiltert, den eigenen Regungen konventionslos folgend dargestellt. Und genauso hat sie die Geburt, das Stillen, das Baby und seine Entwicklung in ihren zeichnerisch-malerischen Bildstil mitgenommen.

Differenzierter und mit einem Schuss Basler Witz geht die 38jährige Schweizerin Maja Rickli die Verflechtung ihrer künstlerischen und ihrer familiären Verpflichtung an. Sie hat unter anderem ein scherenschnittartig wirkendes "Hochzeitskleid" geschaffen, dessen "Spitzen" bei genauem Hinsehen aus Fotografien von Babies ausgeschnitten sind. Träume und Rockzipfel-Realitäten. Sie werden durch eine weitere Arbeit radikalisiert: Auf einem Sofa liegen mit Schrift bestickte Kissen, die unter dem Titel "Das traute Heim" von Morden von Frauen an ihren (Ehe)-Männern berichten.

Kinder sind nur ein Aspekt des Themas Familie; es gibt auch den Familienverbund, die Wohngemeinschaft usw. Als seltene Beispiele sind hier die fotografische "Familienchronik" von Annelies Strbà, die schonungslosen Alltag zeigenden Fotosequenzen von Nan Goldin oder die satirischen "Families" von Ida Applebroog zu erwähnen.

Der Mann: Kaum ein Thema

Was hierbei kaum auftaucht ist das Thema der Partnerschaft, oder konkreter die Auseinandersetzung gemeinsamer Geschlechtlichkeit wie auch immer strukturiert. Die schönsten Männerbilder stammen nicht von Frauen, sondern von homosexuellen Männern, die damit indes nicht den eigenen Körper thematisieren, sondern analog zu ihrem Geschlecht Projektionen visualisieren. Künstlerinnen, die sich körperlich, geistig, seelisch mit dem Mann auseinandersetzen - und zwar nicht aus dem Blickwinkel der "geschlagenen" Frau - sind ganz selten. Es gab einmal eine Ausstellung "Frauen zeigen Männer", doch ist das meiste, das dort zu sehen war, nicht erwähnenswert. Zu tief sitzt wohl den meisten Künstlerinnen die kollektive Vergangenheit in den



Maya Rickli *Ablendkleid* Collage mit Baby Körpern aus Zeitschriften. foto : Kunsthaus Glarus,Switzerland

Knochen. Zwar gibt es unter anderem einen wunderschönen Bildband einer deutschen Fotografin mit sehr intimen Männerkörpern und es gibt die eindrückliche Video-Installation "Les larmes d'acier" von Marie-Jo Lafontaine, die männliche Kraft musikalisch-rhythmisch in "stählerne" Körperbewegung umsetzt und hinterfragt. Einen Versuch, den männlichen Körper ungeschminkt zu zeigen und spürbar werden zu lassen, findet man auch im malerischen Werk der Schweizerin Chantal Wicki. Es bleibt aber dennoch dabei: Der Mann ist kaum ein Thema für die Frauen heute, zumindest nicht in Europa.

Von Wölfen und Pferden

Weil das empfindungsmässig natürlich nicht stimmt, erscheint das männliche Prinzip in der Kunst von Frauen immer wieder in Tiergestalt und damit in eine Traumebene entrückt. Bei der Schweizerin Annette Barcelo zum Beispiel ist die Wanne in welcher die nackte Frau badet, von zugleich unheimlichen, bedrohlichen und letztlich doch Schutz markierender Wölfen umgeben. Bei einem in gewissen Sinn vergleichbaren Bild von Marlène Dumas erscheinen Zwerge in ähnlicher Bildfunktion. Häufiger steht jedoch das Pferd oder der Hirsch für das männliche Prinzip, zum Beispiel in den Bildern der Amerikanerin Susan Rothenberg oder, zum Geschlechterkampf ausgeweitet, in den Bildern der Deutschen Christa Näher, als archaische Liebesspiele in den Zeichnungen der Schweizerin Stéphanie Grob. Subversiv angelegt ist das Thema in den an den Schwänzen zusammengewachsenen "Rattenkönigen" von Katharina Fritsch. Die Reihe liesse sich verlängern.

Das Tier verkörpert aber auch Sehnsuchtsebenen in thematischer Nähe zur Natur, im Wunsch- oder Erkenntnisbild eins zu sein mit Tier und Pflanzen. In den einzigartigen Aquarellen von Maria Lassnig zum Beispiel, im grossen Zyklus "Lesen im Staub" von Miriam Cahn, in den zärtlichen Begegnungen mit Dinosaurierwesen bei der Tessinerin Simonetta Martini, in den Dschungelbildern der Französin Helène Délprat, in den weibliche und tierische Formen verschmelzenden Keramiken der Japanerin Leiko Ikemura, in den zu Skulpturen geformten Klein- und Kriechtier-Zügen der Schweizerin Klaudia Schifferle, den winzigen und doch skulpturalen Insektenansammlungen der in Wien arbeitenden Olivia Etter usw.

Das Hässliche und das Harmonische

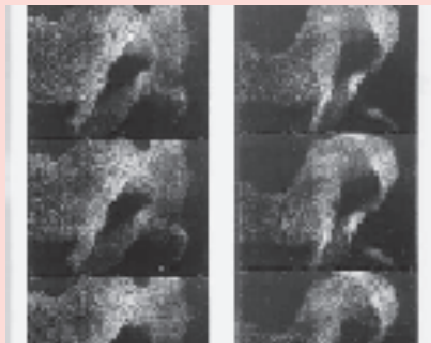
Das Tier verkörpert in den Werken von Frauen auch oft so etwas wie Authentizität (im Gegensatz zum Menschen); etwa in den Videoarbeiten der in Brüssel lebenden Marie José Burki. Wenn sie freilich eine "Videokonferenz" zwischen einem lebenden und einem ausgestopften Uhu anberaumt, so kommt hier durch die Hintertüre die Frage nach der Haltung des Menschen gegenüber dem Tier ins Bild. Es ist indes erstaunlich, dass die drängende Umwelt-Thematik,

die vor allem nach 1975, das heisst nach der Veröffentlichung der Thesen des "Club of Rome" die Kunst "überfiel", im Sinne von Kritik, von Klage, von Drohung, von Zerstörung heute in der Kunst von Frauen kaum mehr als eigenständiges Thema auftaucht.

Vielleicht hängt das damit zusammen, dass die Künstlerinnen das unmittelbar Hässliche nur selten lieben. Gewiss, da gibt es die apokalyptischen Ekel-Szenarien von Cindy Sherman, es gibt die "gehäuteten" Frauengestalten von Kiki Smith, die am Menschen verzweifelnden Arbeiten der Amerikanerin Nancy Spero, das Video der Baslerin Gabriela Gerosa, welches im Raum herumfliegende und am Boden aufprallende gerupfte Hühner zeigt. Doch im Grossen und Ganzen scheinen die Künstlerinnen eine visuelle Harmonisierung ihrer Themen vorzuziehen, selbst wenn sie sich auf dem Zenith als Verführung entpuppen und inhaltlich kippen. Bei Katharina Fritsch zum Beispiel oder bei Jenny Holzer etwa, wenn sich die rot, grün und gelb vorbeiflimmernden Leucht-Schriften als "Lustmord" entpuppen, wenn sich Helen Chadwicks Blümchen als Pisse im Schnee, Louise Bourgeois' geschliffene Alabaster-Penisse als scharfe Messer, Astrid Kleins Gartenweg-Ornamente als Endlos-Gänge für psychisch Kranke herausstellen usw.

Ordnung als Ueberlebensstrategie

Sehr oft gilt die ernsthafte oder auch subversive Suche nach dem harmonischen Bild-Klang der Suche nach einer über die Materie hinausweisenden Gesetzmässigkeit.



Left : Andrea Wolfensberger (CH): *Zufall und Ordnung: Schwalben ber Rom*. Foto- und Filmarbeit.
Right: Ingeborg Luscher (CH) *Jenseits der Ratio. Okimuij-Orakel in Japan*. Fotoarbeit.

Man kann diese Tendenz, die Welt ins Immaterielle auszuweiten, die bei Künstlerinnen sehr ausgeprägt ist, zweifellos als Ueberlebensstrategie in einer männlich besetzten Welt bezeichnen. Aber nicht nur. Zu faszinierend, zu gewaltig und zu nachhaltig sind die Dimensionen der unsere gängigen Sinne überschreitenden Phänomene und sie sind überdies, über technische Hilfsmittel,

auch Nukleus der (immer noch weitgehend männlich besetzten) naturwissenschaftlichen Grundlagenforschung. Unzählige Künstlerinnen lassen sich fangen von empirisch gefundenen, nichteuklidischen Ordnungen.

Die Baslerin Miriam Beerli findet über die äussere Form von Tiergeweihe ihre inneren Wachstumsmuster. Andrea Wolfensberger gelangt über die Formationen von Vögeln in der Luft zu Abläufen und Musterstrukturen. Hanne Darboven sucht über fassbare Zeitmuster deren unendliche Rhythmen. Rebecca Horn zeigt Interferenzen zwischen Energieimpulsen und Formverläufen. Ingeborg Lüscher untersucht unter anderem die psychischen Kräfte (Ordnungen) zwischen zufälligen und sinngebenden Erlebnissen. Barbara Hee zeigt die Entstehung von Form und Volumen als Resultate von Körperbewegung und Körperrhythmus in meditativer Konzentration. Auch Werke konstruktiver Richtung mit starker Betonung intuitiver Farb- und Rhythmusklänge gehören in diesen Kontext.

Materie und Nichtmaterie

In die Thematik des übergeordnet Einwirkenden gehört auch die intensive Auseinandersetzung von Künstlerinnen mit Gegensatz und Gleichheit von Materie und Nichtmaterie, von Fassbarem und Transparentem, von Erde und Licht; die Suche nach formalen Rhythmen, die über sich selbst hinausweisen in sprachlose, sogenannt mystische Felder. Die Existenz einer Welt hinter der Welt ist für viele Künstlerinnen eine Gegebenheit, die sie im Wechselspiel zwischen Erde, Feuer, Wasser und Licht darzustellen suchen. Die Erscheinungsweise ist meist ungegenständlich und sehr oft materialbezogen. Die Wahl der Materialien als Sinnbilder steht den Künstlerinnen ausgesprochen nahe. Werkstoffe sind für sie selten nur Mittel zum Zweck, sondern fast immer auch Schwingungsfelder, die in sich selbst Ausdruck tragen (Eva Hesse, Lili Fischer, Nancy Graves, Magdalena Abakanovic u.v.a.m.).

Analog sind ihre raumbezogenen Arbeiten oft nicht Reaktionen auf eine räumliche Situation, sondern eine Thematisierung des Raumes selbst. Was Louise Bourgeois mit ihren Körper-Häusern quasi illustrierte, ist für viele Künstlerinnen eine Struktur, die sie weit über den organischen Körper hinaus ausweiten. Der Raum - auch Himmel und Erde - als Haut, der Raum als Begrenzung eines Schwingungsfeldes, die Architektur als offenes Feld interagierender Energien. Agnes Martin, Heidi Bucher, Maria Nordmann, Christina Iglesias, Susana Solano, Rachel Whiteread, Isa Genzken, Carmen Perrin, Catrin Lüthi K. Marina Abramovic, Magdalena Jetelova, Marisa Merz, Ingeborg Lüscher, Gillian White, Anne und Patrick Poirier, Alice Aycock, Karin Sanders, und viele andere mehr können in diesen Kontext gestellt werden. Vom Raumgefäss als Architektur respektive Skulptur zur Installation, zur Inszenierung von Gegenständen oder zur Auseinandersetzung mit benennbaren "Dingen", die ja alle auch Volumen umschreiben, ist es kein grundsätzlicher Unterschied.

Die Magie der Dinge

Während die Thematisierung von Raum im weitesten Sinn durch die Nähe von Körper und Um-Haut eine künstlerische Kraft und Eigenheit zum Ausdruck bringt, die Frauen ganz besonders interessiert (ihnen von ihrem ausgesprägten Körperverständnis her eingeschrieben ist), finden sich in Werken mit "Dingen" erneut leichter benennbare, geschlechtsrelevante Momente. Es fällt nämlich auf, dass der Haushalt, die Wohnung, der Umgang mit Dingen aus der allernächsten Umgebung trotz ihrer traditionellen Geschlechtszuordnung ausgesprochen häufig - wenn auch sehr oft ironisch-subversiv - den Weg in die Kunst finden (und unter Umständen gerade darum anecken oder marginalisiert werden).

Muda Mathis zum Beispiel ist technisch, künstlerisch, musikalisch und inhaltlich eine der herausragendsten Schweizer Videokünstlerinnen. Doch die Präsenz ausgesprochen weiblicher Kräfte in ihren "Porträts" ("Babette" ist fast ein Hexensabbat) hat das internationale Echo bisher auf kleinem Feuer belassen. Monika Rutishauser "möbliert" in Form von Tafelbildern ganze Wohnungen nach dem Prinzip des "Idealem Heimes", des schönen Scheins. Anders Rosmarie Trockel, die weibliche Muster, wie zum Beispiel "stricken", in maschineller Umsetzung einsetzt, und damit in die Männerwelt kippt und die Gegensätze auf konzeptueller Ebene ausspielt. Ihre herausragenden Zeichnungen zeigen übrigens sehr schön auf, wie Künstlerinnen aus der Intimität körpernaher Bilder in den distanzierteren Aussenraum konzeptueller Aussagen vordringen (ein weiteres Beispiel wäre Ilona Rüeegg).

Von Innen nach Aussen, von Aussen nach Innen

Den umgekehrten Weg beschreitet die Amerikanerin "Sturtevant", die für sie wichtige plastische Werke aus der Kunstgeschichte nachformt, um die emotionale Beziehung zur äusseren Form durch Gestalten zu verinnerlichen. Wie mit "Dingen" wird manchmal auch mit dem Körper umgegangen, der in Fragmenten betrachtet als Teil erscheint, sei es plastisch oder in der von Künstlerinnen oft zum Hauptwerk erklärten Zeichnungen. Als Beispiel die in Deutschland lehrende Schweizerin Silvia Bächli: Sie lässt Körperpräsenz über Kleidungsstücke, Körperfragmente und möbelähnliche Formen zusammenwirken und zwar so, dass äusseres Wahrnehmen von Form und das Tragen, Berühren, Spüren derselben gleichzeitig manifest wird.

Ihr Anliegen, die Zeichnungen als Wandinstallationen (Energiefelder) zu präsentieren, entspricht einem starken Bedürfnis von Künstlerinnen, mehrere Teile zu einem Ganzen zu fügen - seien dies verschiedene Themen, Techniken, Ansätze, Materialien (etwas, was den Künstlerinnen lange Zeit als Schwäche, als Fehlen eines fassbaren Werkcharakters ausgelegt wurde bis es nun auch die Arbeitsmethoden der jungen Künstler ergriffen hat), seien es verschiedene Gedanken, Gegenstände, Bildteile, die sich als Werk zu assoziativen Feldern

verbinden. Klassische Beispiele sind die aus einer Vielzahl von Zetteln zu Inszenierungen zusammengefügt Installationen der frühverstorbenen Deutschen Anna Oppermann, die "Wohnungen" der Amerikanerin Jessica Stockholder.

Es gäbe viele Aspekte und Tausende von Künstlerinnen mehr, doch so wie wir die Welt nur in Teilen fassen können, sie nur begreifen, wo ihre "Muster" mit eigenen Prägungen zusammenfinden, so ist und bleibt auch dieser Text Stück-Werk, jederzeit erweiter- und ergänzbar, aus amerikanischer Optik vielleicht sogar da und dort wiederlegbar.

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Are there still themes in Contemporary Art? And if so, which are of interest to Women Artists Today?

Annelise Zwez

English Translation by Frances Deepwell

Theme of the preamble: the Internet

Online texts have yet to find their own specific form. The Internet is neither a written nor a spoken medium. The form of a letter seems to me to be one possibility since the message it conveys is considered and at the same time direct.

Dear Katy,

You showed immediate enthusiasm for the idea I had for *n.paradoxa* to look at the themes which concern women artists today. We both felt that this would reveal something much more fundamental about women's art than all the statistics and grievances about how women's art is overlooked, unbought and underrepresented. And at the same time, we agreed that the topic should primarily be about how these themes are handled rather than a comparison with similar themes which concern men artists.

The more research I did, the more I became excited by this question.

'But the world is the theme of art', was the bemused response from a Swiss museum director as I began my investigations. Certainly this is true, but perspectives are always affected by stories: historical, geographical, social, generational, gender-specific stories. The latter type are the most contentious since they make gender a category, on a par with sexuality and traditionally 'second class' roles. Women are more than this. Nonetheless I rue the day when women (and also men) do not have their own conscious view on life, since then we would all be neuter.

A gap at the Venice Biennale

Stories change. Had I written this article in 1980 I would certainly be trying to delve into female themes and set them against male ones. Black and white. Women's art of the time would have provided a rich source of artwork to support this approach. Valie Export, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold, Marina Abramovic, Louise Bourgeois, Miriam Cahn. The general theme would be the body. The ego of the female body as a symbol for the collective woman. The issue here cannot be a reworking of this historical theme, even though this is urgently needed. For I can still feel rage at the fact that Jean Clair conceived the Venice Biennale exhibition *Body- Identity - Age* without showing women artists' viewpoints on this theme at that time.

The four levels of self consciousness

Stories change. Up until the late 1980s there were really only three groups of women artists. Firstly, those rooted in the spirit pre-1968 who cannot free themselves from the idea that works of art are good if they 'could have been done just as well by a man'. Perhaps this is precisely why such works are often no more than mediocre.

Secondly, those rooted in traditional female techniques (textiles, paper, ceramics and other materials) who suffer discrimination against their work as inferior *craft work* but who are unable to free themselves from the protection of this ghetto of *women's art* and do not risk experimenting with new materials, motifs or techniques.

Thirdly, those shaped by 1968 (for Americans it is probably better to say the 1960s) for whom the development and application of one's consciousness as a woman is the fundamental driving force behind their artistic expression and presence on the art scene. Moreover, this is unrelated to whether or not their motifs, techniques and working methods thematicize the force "woman" either directly or indirectly. This largest group has produced the most important works of art by women from the mid sixties to the late eighties.

A fourth group emerged in the second half of the eighties. Women who either because of their young age or their path of development possess a consciousness independent of their gender. They have discarded the role of martyr and fight uncompromisingly for their perspective of the world, maintaining a delicate and individual balance between their female and male selves; setbacks and all. It is no surprise that their themes often encompass a range of material and intellectual levels, emphasising the equality of one or the other or resorting to irony in order to handle ad absurdum the perpetual battle of the sexes. These are part and parcel of the women's art scene today. Just as the grouping is not always clear, the groups are not restricted to a particular generation. In the 1970s there were numerous women artists who quasi skipped a generation and as older women, became *young*

artists or only then were seen as being of any significance. On the other hand, there are still women artists today who are sitting in their ivory towers, waiting for the prince to come and kiss them and who are offended if he will not.

Born of need, rage, lust - what binds Louise Bourgeois to the Bad Girls and where do they they differ?

Assuming that women artists practising today had their formative experiences between 1940 and 1990, one can see that all four groups are still present. For a thematic investigation, this means that the themes which are addressed by women artists show very different temporal perspectives which frequently intertwine in a curious fashion. Look at the difference between Louise Bourgeois and the Bad Girls.

The work of Louise Bourgeois (born 1911) displays the emotions of her childhood growing up in a family of mother, father and father's mistress. The gender-motivated identification with her mother (see also Carol Gilligan) has given her a trauma about the explosive force of male sexuality. Her knife-penises, her many-breasted objects, her loaded memento mori - *Torture Chambers* rooted in the oppressive, sometimes sadistic, sometimes also seductive analysis of the destructive gender of her father.

Nonetheless it would be one-sided to view her work from this perspective alone, for the quality of artistic expression is necessarily coupled with the strength of the interpretation of the predominant theme. And quality lies in diversity of meaning, in translating the individual, the private into generally applicable levels. Louise Bourgeois is a great artist. She, possibly as the first ever, developed the theme of sexuality from her own subjective view. But in some sense she is bound to her generation because the phenomenon of her father's adultery goes beyond the specific response of the artist to become one of her time and because the art was born from deepest necessity.

Phalluses and vaginas

Quite different from this are the Bad Girls, mostly born in the sixties, and the women artists who relate closely to them who approach female sexuality, identity and gender interchangeability with humour, wit and an undercurrent of irony and entirely without taboos. Their works make direct reference to that of Louise Bourgeois in form and content, rarely in technique. But they have come from an entirely different position. They make play of the erotic female body, hang wax breasts on the walls, blow up buttocks and decorate them with velvet ribbons, draw the stirrings of desire under their skirts, show masturbation as performance art, transform penises into candlesticks, castrate young men with brush and pen, crochet phalluses and vaginas, transform into flower-beds the holes burnt with urine in the snow. They work with video and photography, using the possibilities of computer manipulation, wallowing in the bloody tones of digital red, adding breasts and sex organs of varying size and potency or removing them, making babies into sex objects with adult male mouths....

They perpetuate the old phenomenon that men represent their sexual feelings as a projection on women's bodies, whereas women show their sexuality with their own bodies carried to the extreme, leading men (and themselves) astray with humour - but sometimes a great deal of banality.

(see images p. 16) Keith Boadwee (USA): "*Jasmine Swami*" Die "Bad Girls" als Trendsetter. Fotoarbeit. Bessie Nager *Brste als Lust* Objekte aus Gips Beton und Leder (Foto: Kunsthaus: Glarus, Switzerland)

Out: woman as sex object for men

Completing this theme, we must also mention the middle generation, the classic feminist generation who out of sheer rebellion have cast down from its the role of woman in the image of man, thereby setting something fundamental in motion:

The significance and the recognition that Louise Bourgeois enjoys today came at first from women who saw the gender specific dimension of her work. The radical and aggressive way with which Louise Bourgeois presents this theme soon gained the attention of men, too, who perhaps for the first time saw themselves in their (much suppressed) physical presence as a theme in art.

It is Louise Bourgeois' strength - as in the work of Jenny Holzer - that she does not formulate the theme in condemnation, but lets the theme develop in itself and thereby becomes an open vessel. Very different from the first generation of feminism who exposed their suffering at the hands of man in clear and accusing terms, thereby meeting with little compassion (understandably) from men and being largely ignored by the patriarchal art scene. Nonetheless their presence and their strength had the effect that men found it harder and harder to bring their sexual fantasies about the female body into their work. And this had two results:

Are the Bad Girls working into the hands of men?

What is specific to gender and what is specific to roles?

"Body" as a theme became a general theme again in the 1990s because artists finally had nothing left to explore but themselves. This can be dull for the women of 1968 who have already covered this ground a long time before - albeit in a different form as pertains to their history; however, amongst the young women artists, particularly in the USA, there is a new impetus - mainly in film and video. But it also brings with it the Bad Girls who focus on sexuality, not from a sense of inner need but rather in order to pursue their own desires with no limit to their imagination. In this they are playing into the hands of those men who have always been turned on by female sexuality and who now find themselves confronted with a lecherousness they have known previously only in their own imagination (this probably explains why Bad Girlism has been so successful all over the world).

This paradoxical phenomenon is not exactly new; on the contrary it has long been in existence. The fact that women have never objected to their naked presence in art is why - in the search for eroticism in their own body - they ignore the history

of the *nude* and identify with these male projections of themselves. Just think, as an example, of the erotic drawings of Gustav Klimt and of the poses which his models had to assume in order to feed his artistic desire for satisfaction, a sexist story par excellence. However, as can be seen at every exhibition of these pictures, women unashamedly and with much sexual pleasure enjoy looking at the erotic contortions.

Before moving onto another topic, I must make one more comment: Let us briefly consider how women respond to exhibitions of expressly male sexuality, such as we find in the expressionism of the eighties. Aggressive as they are, such exhibitions do not arouse desire - more often than not, in fact, the opposite. On the other hand, the transformed or rediscovered male body of the nineties, addressing the topic destructively in part, but also tenderly, can change the response. This means that the observations made above are not in essence gender specific, but are associated with the roles played by men and women.

Why do (one's own) children not feature in the art of women?

Another theme which is making its appearance in the art of women today - from a European perspective - is *children* and *the family*. In the history of male, European art, the theme of the family reappears constantly as an idyll. And *Mother and Child*, the *Pietà*, is one of the most common motifs in the history of painting. But it is rare to find this theme in the more recent art of European women. All the more surprising since in America this theme in art raises the debate on social structures. So much so that often not even one's own identity, one's own gender can be taken for granted. Role-specific *traumas* come to the fore here, more so than with the theme *sexuality*. To have children or not is an existential theme in the life of every woman and yet it barely features in European art (at least not in any way that is relevant to art) or is transferred into a virtual fantasy world. There is obviously some suppression of feeling here. The career of a woman artist is in itself so strongly bound up with the relinquishing of a family - or even a long-term relationship - that survival is only possible if the theme of children is excluded. Achievement in the art scene demands freedom of movement, a family generally implies that one is fixed to one place. This reveals an area of art which has yet to be emancipated, an area which has grown larger than ever with the strong internationalisation of art in recent years (where it frequently comes to the crunch anyway).

It is interesting that only a few women artists with children tackle the theme. In terms of role-specific themes, this has such a negative aspect to it, is linked so closely to the traditional image of woman which they have shaken off, that the artists do not want to adopt it either negatively or positively. But this does not imply that women artists do not like children any less than other women, it is just that the theme remains unaddressed psychologically and is therefore a vacuum. Furthermore, artist mothers have to expend so much energy in order to fulfill their two conflicting obligations that once they finally reach the studio they

understandably shut out the other aspect of their life completely. This really is not the only theme in the world.

Proud mothers, babies clinging to their apron-strings It is fascinating to see how that motif appears, where it appears in the female world of painting and philosophy in spite of everything. For instance the 46 year old American Jenny Holzer, mother to a daughter aged around 10. She has tackled the theme of "Mother and child" in her suggestive cycle of writings in a most woman conscious way and without any inhibitions with phrases such as: "A man can't know what it is like to be a mother."

The 43 year old Dutch artist Marlène Dumas, brought up in South Africa, is mother to a seven year old daughter and similarly deals with the theme with that mixture of love and pride that all mothers know. Marlène Dumas presents the battle of the sexes, the urge to be loved, her sexuality and pregnancy directly and unfiltered according to her own impulses and not convention. And in this way she has tackled the birth, nursing and development of her baby in her drawing-like painting style.

Somewhat more discerning in her presentation of the intermingling of her artistic and her domestic duties is the 38 year old Swiss artist Maja Rikli, who also throws in a smattering of Basel wit. Amongst other things, she has created a scissor-cut "wedding dress" the lace of which on closer inspection turns out to be made of baby photographs. Dreams and apron-string realities. Made more radical in another of her works: On a sofa lie cushions embroidered with words reporting murders of husbands by their wives under the title "Home Sweet Home".

(see page 18) Maya Rikli 'Ablendkleid' Collage mit Baby Korpen aus Zeitschriften. foto : Kunsthaus Glarus,Switzerland

Children are just one theme within the family. There is also the family unit and communal living, etc. Rare examples of this is the family chronicle in photographs by Annelies Strbä, the uncompromising view of everyday life shown in the photographic sequences which Nan Goldwin has created or the satirical "families" by Ida Applebroog.

Men: barely a theme

In all of this there is barely a mention of partnership, or more concretely the issue of common sexuality in whatever form this may take. The most beautiful images of men are not created by women, but by homosexual men who are not presenting their own bodies as the theme so much as projecting onto the same gender. There are very few women artists who analyse men physically, emotionally and intellectually - and not from the perspective of woman as victim. There was once an exhibition entitled "Women showing men", but most of what was on show there is not worth a mention. The collective past must be too deeply entrenched in most women artists. Admittedly, there was a wonderful book of intimate pictures of male bodies by a woman photographer and the impressive video installation *Les larmes*

d'acier by Marie-Jo Lafontaine which questions male power, translating it with rhythmic music into *steel* movements. The paintings of Swiss artist Chantal Wicki are a further attempt to show the male body without embellishment. But the fact remains that men are barely a theme for women today, at least not in Europe.

Of wolves and horses

Of course this is not correct in terms of our feelings are concerned and so the male principle does appear in women's art, but in the form of animals, thereby shifting it into the sphere of dreams. The Swiss artist Annette Barcelo, for instance, portrays a woman bathing naked in a bathtub surrounded by mysterious, threatening and, at the same time, protective wolves. In a comparable painting, Marlène Dumas' gnomes perform the same function. More frequently, however, horses or deer are used to represent the male principle, for example in the work of the American Susan Rothenberg; or, as regards the battle of the sexes, that of the German Christa Näher; or, as an archaic love ritual, the drawings of the Swiss artist Stéphanie Grob. A subversive approach to the theme comes from Katharina Fritsch in the *Rat Kings* whose tails are joined together. I could name more.

However, animals also embody the desire to being close to nature, at one with plants and animals in your wishes or knowledge. In the unique watercolours of Maria Lassnig, for instance, in the large cycle *Reading in the dust* of Miriam Cahn, in the tender encounters with dinosaurs of the Tessin artist Simonetta Martini, in the jungle paintings of the French artist Helène Délprat, in the female and animal ceramic forms of the Japanese artist Leiko Ikemira, in the small animal and reptile features in the work of the Swiss sculptor Klaudia Schifferle, the tiny, sculptural insect collection of the Viennese artist Olivia Etter, and so on.

Beauty and the Beast

Animals (in contrast to people) also symbolize something close to authenticity in the works of women; such as in the video works of the Brussels artist Marie José Burki. By setting up a video conference between a living owl and a stuffed one, she subversively raises the question of human behaviour towards animals. However, it is astonishing that the theme of the environment rarely appears any longer as an independent theme in the art of even though it *ambushed* art in the sense of criticism, accusation, threat, destruction particularly after 1975, with the publication of the theses of the *Club of Rome*.

Perhaps this is connected to the fact that women artists rarely love anything which is directly ugly. Although there are some exceptions: Cindy Sherman's disgusting apocalyptic scenes, Kiki Smith's 'skinned' female forms, the hopelessness portrayed in the work of the American Nancy Spero, the video of the Basel artist Gabriela Gerosa which shows plucked hens flying around in the air and crashing to the floor. But on the whole, women artists prefer a visual harmony in their themes,

even when this is revealed to be a seduction and belies the message. In the work of Katharina Fritsch or Jenny Holzer, for instance, when the flashing red, green and amber lights spell out the word for sex murder: Lustmord, Helen Chadwick's flowers are really the result of urine in the snow, Louise Bourgeois' alabaster penises are sharp knives, Astrid Klein's garden ornaments are endless corridors for the mentally ill, and so forth.

Order as a survival strategy

Very often the serious or subversive search for harmony in a picture is the search for a sense of order which goes beyond what is material. This tendency to make the world immaterial, which often characterises women artists, can doubtlessly be interpreted as a survival strategy in a world occupied by men. But not only. The dimensions of these phenomena which extend beyond our understanding are too fascinating, too powerful and too long-lasting and they are, with technical aids, also the nucleus of pure scientific research (an area which is still largely dominated by men). Numerous women artists have been captivated by empirical, non-Euclidean systems.

The Basel artist Miriam Beerli finds her inner pattern for growth in animal antlers. Andrea Wolfensberger gains inspiration for her channels and structures from bird formations in the sky. Hanne Darboven searches for her eternal rhythms in the tangible patterns of time. Rebecca Horn shows interference between energy impulses and forms. Ingeborg Lüscher examines, amongst other things, psychic energies (orders) between random and meaningful experiences. Barbara Hee demonstrates the development of form and volume as the result of body movements and rhythms in a meditative concentration. Works which are constructive and have a strong emphasis on intuitive colour and rhythms also belong in this context.

(see page 20) Left : Andrea Wolfensberger (CH): *Zufall und Ordnung: Schwalben ber Rom*. Foto- und Filmarbeit. Right: Ingeborg Luscher (CH) *Jenseits der Ratio*. Okimuij-Orakel in Japan. Fotoarbeit.

Material and Non-material

The super-sensory theme also embraces the intense analysis women artists have undertaken of the contrast and the similarity between the material and the non-material, the tangible and the transparent, earth and light; the quest for formal rhythms which reach beyond themselves into silent, so-called mystic spheres. Many women artists assume the existence of a world behind our world which they seek to portray in the interplay between earth, fire, water and light. It appears mostly in abstract form and very often related to something material. The choice of materials is very often symbolic. Materials are rarely seen as a means to an end, but rather as an expressive medium in their own right (Eva Hesse, Lili Fischer, Nancy Graves, Magdalena Abakanovic to mention just a few of many examples of this).

Analogous to this, their room-based works are often not reactions to a spatial situation but make space itself the theme. Louise Bourgeois illustrates with her body-houses a structure which many women artists take far beyond their organic body. Space - also sky and earth - as skin, space which restricts movement, architecture as an open field of interactive energies. Agnes Martin, Heidi Bucher, Maria Nordmann, Christina Iglesias, Susan Solano, Rachel Whiteread, Isa Genzken, Carmen Perrin, Catrin Luthi K. Marina Abramovic, Magdalena Jetelova, Marisa Merz, Ingeborg Lüscher, Gillian White, Anne and Patrick Poirier, Alice Aycock, Karin Sanders and many others could be set in this context. There is no great distinction between space as an architectural sculpture and installation, placing objects or named 'things', all of which pertain to volume.

The magic of things

Whilst space as a theme in its broadest sense, through the relative closeness of body and skin, expresses an artistic power and individuality which interests women greatly (with their heightened understanding of the body), artworks of *things* have impulses which are easier to name and relevant to gender. It is noticeable that - despite the traditional gender divide -housework, the home or things from our immediate environment find their way exceedingly often into art - even if there is frequently an ironic or subversive undertone (and precisely for this reason they can be unwelcome or marginalised).

Muda Mathis for example is one of the most outstanding Swiss video artists technically, artistically, musically and content-wise. Nonetheless, the presence of decidedly female forces in her *Portraits* (Babette is almost a witches sabbath) has limited her international acclaim. Monika Rutishauser *furnishes* complete apartments as tableaux of the *ideal home*, the beautiful surface image. Rosmarie Trockel, on the other hand, transforms female patterns such as *knitting* into a mechanical procedure and thereby transposes them into the world of men, playing on the contrasts on a conceptual level. Moreover, her exceptional drawings very clearly show how women artists make conceptual statements on distance from the intimacy of tangible images (one further example is Ilona Rüeegg).

From the inside out and the outside in

An opposite direction is taken by the American artist Sturtevant who copies sculptures which she considers significant in art history in order to internalise her emotional relationship to external form. The body is on occasion treated in the same way as *things*, being viewed in fragments and seen as a part, either in sculpture or in the drawings which women artists often declare as the main work.

An example of this is the Swiss artist Silvia Bächli who teaches in Germany; she allows a physical presence to emerge in items of clothing, body parts and furniture-like shapes in such a way that the external perception of form and the wearing,

touching, feeling of the same is manifest. Her desire to show the drawings as a wall installation (energy fields) is in keeping with a strong need by women artists to join several parts to a whole - be they different themes, techniques, standpoints or materials (something which has been seen as a weakness in women artists, as a failure to display a definite character in their work until, that is, it has been embraced as a method of working by young artists), be they different thoughts, objects, partial images linked in a work of associative frames.

Classic examples of this are the installations of numerous sheets of paper by the German artist Anna Oppermann before her premature death, or the 'apartments' (room installations) of the American Jessica Stockholder.

There are many aspects and thousands more women artists but, just as we can comprehend the world only in parts and can understand when these individual 'patterns' with their individual characteristics belong together, this text also remains a partial work, open for further extensions and supplements or, from an American standpoint, perhaps even for being proved wrong in places.

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The 17th Century Tale of Lady Liu and Lady Remington and a 20th Century Postscript

Maira Roth & Hung Liu

Preface

This tale was inspired by a conversation on July 29 1996 between Hung Liu and myself over dinner at her house in Oakland (where she was recovering from surgery). She told me that she had just received a phone call requesting the name of a 'at-least-seventy-five-year-old-dead' Chinese woman artist for some project in New York, and could not provide one. We talked idly of research and invention.

I went home and, taken by fancy, began to write rather feverishly.

Faxes went back and forth between the two of us and within three days our tale was finished on July 31st 1996.

Maira Roth, Berkeley.

Excerpt from a letter recently given to the British Museum, London, published for the first time in "Lady Liu, A 17th Century Chinese Woman Artist," by Maira Roth, *Feminist Studies* (Summer, 1996).

Note: I have changed certain archaic spellings and phrasing to make for better comprehension of the modern reader. Ed.

From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 24,1620

Lord Remington and I have just returned from paying our respects to the Peking imperial court, and I have so much to tell you, my dear sister. We stood in the vast courtyard, flanked by the Emperor's Life Guards, and twelve white horses, and made our way slowly across it. The flagstones are marked for where one must, yet again, make an obeisance.



Although we spent our time bowing nine times (it is called the kowtow) to the Emperor Wan-Li, and did not permit ourselves more than a mere glance, his regal bearings, the brilliance of his yellow robes and the huge pearl in his Imperial Hat dazzled us. But, dear sister, it was not only his presence but also--for the merest moment--we glimpsed Lady Liu who is said to be that rare creature, a female painter. We had, of course, heard rumors of her existence, but now we saw her standing in the background of the group of courtiers. I am determined, Julie, before we leave China to try to find a painting by her to bring back to England. You must wish me luck in this impossible dream.

From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 25, 1920

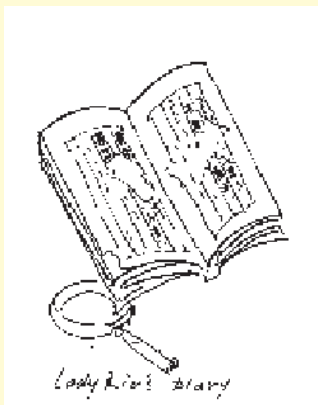
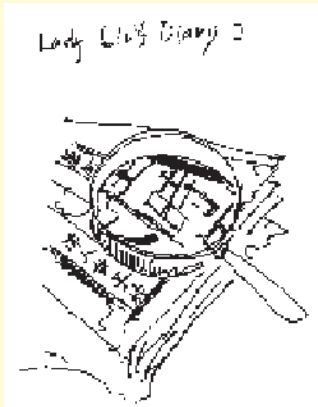
My dearest Julie,

This day has been an extraordinary one. We rose to drink jasmine tea, as is the custom here, and a servant informed us that we had a visitor in the waiting room. It is, of course, always Lord Remington who is asked for but this time the visitor was announced as having come to see me. I thought surely it must be a mistake, but I asked to have the visitor ushered into my reception room. It was Lady *Liu* (Although I have now heard from her own lips that I should spell it LI and not Liu.)

I could not believe my eyes. She told me through her translator-servant that she had heard that I was interested in meeting her, and so she had come in her carriage as soon as she could. It is, as you can imagine, an unheard honor for a European to be visited in such a way.

Lady Li is unusually tall for a Chinese woman and her eyes are very bright. Her clothing was simple but rich material, and around her neck she wore, what I have been told, is her famous *signature*--an opal necklace. She smiled and laughed a lot as we exchanged greetings. I felt surprisingly that I did not have to stand on ceremony. She wants to know what England is like and I, of course, want to know what China is like. And, Julie, she wants to do my portrait as she has never had the opportunity to paint a European woman before. I am told that she paints for the Emperor Wan-Li. Imagine that she may paint me. We are to talk more tomorrow. She is worried that the Emperor may hear of her rash offer, but she is determined to do it anyway.





From the Diary of Lady Li, July 25, 1620

Editor's Note: this fascinating document was badly damaged in the Great Flood in Peking of 1793, and there are many missing sections.

I risked the Imperial anger and left the palace today to seek out Lady Remington. There is something about her that I must know. She reminds me of . . . [missing section] .When I first saw her in her house, I thought that she [missing section]. She spoke to me as a friend. I have no friends at court. Everyone is jealous of me and if it were not that I am known to be in the Emperor's good grace, I dread what might be my fate. Lady Remington said . . . [missing section] and I replied that I could not but agree. We laughed together. I left feeling that I must paint her.

From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 26, 1620

I have talked to my new friend today as she has begun my portrait. She asks me many questions about you, dear sister, as it appears that she, too has a sister, a little younger than she-just like us--and she wants to meet you. She tells me, through her stiff and anxious and embarrassed translator- servant, that as children they were inseparable, but now her sister lives two thousand miles away. Lady Liu dreams of her each night, and in her dreams sees herself splashing water on her young sister's hair. They lived near a lake and would go each day to wash their hair and catch pale green fish and run after large blue butterflies that flew near the shore.

Do you remember when we would run away from our nurses and go to the stream to wash our hair?

This afternoon I rested, and fell asleep and I dreamed that I was surrounded by clouds of huge blue butterflies. Nearby, a child laughed and dapped her hands. Was it you, or Lady Liu or her sister? I don't know, but I do know that I woke smiling.

**A Poem by the sister of Lady Liu
July 26, 1620**

Blue Butterflies
My sister's long hair
Dreams
I see two sisters
Across Time



Letter from Lord Remington in Peking to his friend, Sir John Reynolds in London, July 26,1620

My dearest love,

We wait impatiently to leave this God-forsaken country. The Chinese heathens are despicable and the Ming Court foolish in its pretensions. There is no one to talk to, and nothing happens here that gives pleasure. I long for England and its Christian ways. Only five more days and we leave for the treacherous journey back to London but the risk is worth it to see and embrace my family and friends and, most of all, you.

Mary joins me in sending you love. Curiously it is the first time today that she has not complained about China. If I did not know her so well, I would suspect that she has some secret that she has not confided in me. A foolish thought, of course. She still does not know of our passion for each other.

Excerpt from the Fragments of an Unfinished Novel based on the Life of Lady Liu by her erstwhile lover, S.

... Lady Liu returned to the Palace, her head filled with stories of English crumpets and strawberry jam, of fishing and hunting excursions in aristocratic country homes and of children plaintively singing Lady Greensleeves around a huge log fire.

Lady Pamela was equally enchanted with Lady Su's descriptions of the shoes she and her siblings had worn-- embroidered brilliant dark green-and-purple dragons on the boys' shoes and pale mauve-and-pink pigeons on the girls'. Of stories of bowls of noodles and duck's feet, and of long summer nights sitting in the dark listening to their grandfather tell stories from his childhood in Manchuria before he came to China.

Each woman wanted to live in the other's memories.....



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From Lady Mary Remington to her sister, Julie Remington, July 27,1620

We have but a few days left before we leave Peking for our long arduous journey home to England. Much as I am longing to see you and our dear Mother, I am suddenly loath to leave. John, on the other hand, is counting the days impatiently. He seems in a slightly odd, almost secretive mood. When I woke up this morning--to the sounds of the peacocks in our garden-- I wondered briefly why but find that I cannot heed his moods because my thoughts and heart are elsewhere.

Lady Liu and I are meeting again today. I have asked her to tea so that we may continue to talk--she will be arriving at 4 pm, and has promised to bring me the sketch she made for my portrait. But even more important than art is life. I feel I have suddenly found a second sister. And she feels the same.

We are fearful of anyone finding out she is coming to see me, so she plans to come disguised as a beggar. That means she will make the last part of her journey to my house by foot. She will be able to walk on foot unlike other high-born women because her parents refused to have her feet bound. (She must be the only woman at the court with unbound feet.)

From Lady Liu's sister * to Lady Liu July 27,1620

Editors Note: As of this time, we have not been able to identify the name of this sister. Again, as with Lady Liu's Diary, the letter's text has been badly damaged.

.... I write anxiously, dearest sister, to hear your news from the Court of Emperor Wan-Li. As I sit in our small village, living with our old parents, I think of the miracle that transplanted you to Peking. Do you remember the day [missing section]. We still speak of it in the village.

Last night I had a dream of you. You were sitting intensely talking to a foreign woman, strangely white and oddly dressed. Was she a ghost?

[The letter ends at this point as there is a missing section]

Fax from Lady Jane Remington to her sister, Lydia Remington, July 30,1996

I have so much to tell you but I must be brief for I am exhausted with having worked all day in the house. So many discoveries. So many explanations of our Remington family history. What seemed myths and legends are actual facts. Amazing.

We arrived yesterday at the village and were greeted by women in the Liu family. It is a tiny village and *The Liu-Remington House* is far larger than any other structure there. As you know, the village is part of the small section in China where there is--literally--a woman's language passed down from generation to generation as well as "women's art' traditions. Right in the center of this is the history of our 17th century relative, Lady Mary Remington and *her* Lady Liu.

The Liu sisters--who are just our age, my dearest Lydia--greeted me like family. And, of course, we are. After they had settled me in my room, they took me to the Room of Memories and there I discovered to my astonishment both letters and diaries by

[Editors Note: transmission was interrupted at this point and there is no further fax.]

Editor's Postscript, July 30,1996. Moira Roth

To piece together the story of the encounter between Lady Remington and Lady Liu in 1620 has been a fascinating mixture of amateur detective work and fortuitous events. In the spring of 1994 Hung Liu, an artist originally from Beijing but now living in Oakland, and myself, a historian and critic of contemporary art, read about a region in China where there was a tradition of a secret women's language; we decided to seek out the last living survivors. Travelling by train, railway, bus and car we finally arrived at a small village where we met Gee Ling Oy. She was at that time age ninety-five - a lucid, animated woman who talked to us hour after hour with a sense of urgency- who taught Hung Liu as much of the language as she could in the month that we stayed in the village. We tape recorded Gee Lin Oy's account of the history of this extraordinary centuries-old phenomenon. Central to her accounts of its origins were references to an anonymous Chinese 17th century woman painter, who was said to have fled suddenly from the Imperial Court (upon hearing of the Emperor's ban on her painting) with a newly-found friend, an English woman, who had decided to stay in China rather than return to England with her husband. (Gee Lin Oy told us that legend had it that this decision was caused by the English woman opening a letter by mistake--a few days before their planned departure--which disclosed her husband's infidelity.) The two women came to live with the artist's sister, and it was in the sister's village that this "woman's language" first originated. But search as Hung Liu and I did, we could find no concrete evidence to support this story. Now with the discovery of the texts that I have published here- together with investigations we hear are currently being undertaken by descendants of Lady Remington--we are able to begin to lay out fragments of this 17th century Chinese woman artist's life. Is it too much to hope that in time we will also discover actual works by Lady Liu?

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Uncanny Resemblances: Restaging Claude Cahun in *Mise en Scene*

Katy Deepwell

Mise en Scene was an exhibition held at the ICA in London, England, 13 October-27 November 1994.

On the tail end of the Signals festival in 1994, the ICA, London staged a comparison between the photographic self-portraits, 1927-1947, of a much neglected Surrealist Claude Cahun (a woman who worked in both Paris and the U.K.) and two young contemporary British-based artists, Virginia Nimarkoh and Tacita Dean. The film concept of *mise en scene* was redeployed to link the many diverse identities represented in the photographic/video works in this show. The rediscovery of Cahun's self-portraits has added a new dimension to this artist's work, which until the publication of Leperlier's biography in 1992, had been known only to a few cognoscentiamongst Surrealist scholars through her published essays and the inclusion of several Surreal still-lives in the Hayward Gallery exhibition *L'Amour Fou* in the 1970s.

David Bate, who wrote the accompanying exhibition catalogue, suggested that Claude Cahun's self-portraits 'hit contemporary practice like an arrow through time', encouraging the audience to draw immediate comparisons to the American artist, Cindy Sherman. However, the resonances and codes of Sherman's comparatively well-known film stills, history portraits and more recent critiques of pornography are not echoed in Cahun's images of herself as dandy, skinheaded androgyne, nymph, model, soldier, etc. For this comparison to work a specific set of theoretical debates was mobilised which undercut the different modes and sites of these works' production and the gap of 50-70 years between Cahun, Nimarkoh and Dean. Central to this is the renewed analysis of Joan Riviere's 1929 essay 'Womanliness as

Masquerade' by cultural/film theorists actively renegotiating the legacy of Lacan and semiotics. But the stage is also set, in the context of the London ICA's own programming, by blending its programmed debates on Queer Theory with Rosalind Krauss's work in *Optical Unconscious* (USA: MIT Press, 1994) and Hal Foster's *Compulsive Beauty* (USA: MIT Press, 1995). These books engage with Modernism's Other, Surrealism, and seek to reconsider the formal and psychoanalytic disruptions within Surrealism through Freudian theories of the uncanny and fetishism. Breton's concepts of 'convulsive beauty' and the 'marvellous' in particular are also explored (exclusively through the work of male Surrealists and by highlighting Breton's differences with Bataille). It is not just these trends in current theoretical work which assist the production of an audience now for Claude Cahun's self-portraiture but current fashions in hairstyles (e.g. skinhead haircuts) and androgynous/bi-sexual body images which are echoed and repeated in the codes of representation identifiable within her work.

Two theoretical points strike me as absent from the presentation of this show via the catalogue : the first is the situation of the works within the codes of representation manifest in popular culture which the artists work both maintains and subverts. The second, is the absence of feminist perspectives on these three women. The *orthodox* reading provided for this show via Lacan/Riviere and identities constructed for the male gaze (with a nod toward space for a female gaze) is lacking precisely because while it seeks to problematise *feminine* identities without engaging in its necessary correlate the problematising of masculinity.

Because of the above, the analysis of gender relations does collapse into individualised (auto)biography and a further staging of the Surrealist problem of *woman* (in the case of Claude Cahun); a form of gender indifference marked by attention to racial difference (in the case of Virginia Nimarkoh); and the presentation of *passing* from female to male *roles* and a ritualistic re-enactment of Catholic mythologies surrounding St Agnes (in the case of Tacita Dean). Exploring the feminine becomes another extension of a masculinist agenda : rediscovering the Other. The questions feminism asks about women's *resistance*, feminist intervention in the dominant discourses and any *potential* transformation of the position of women disappear from the agenda. The link between Dean and Cahun in Dean's appropriation of the 1928 photograph which forms the basis of her installation artwork *The Stowaway* masks the generational gap amongst the three artists with respect to contemporary feminist politics.

Mise en Scene stages two artists born in the mid-late sixties, a generation apart from the Women's Liberation Movement, against an artist born in 1894, whose career significantly spans the *uncharted* period between Radcliffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1944). The comparison tacitly acknowledges but not engage women's relationships (as gendered artists, subjects of representation, or viewers) to feminist debates, both now and then, which

with renewed work on the lesbian sub-culture of women writers in Paris has increasingly brought back into view.

Does this show represent the further evacuation of feminist concerns from the London ICA - exhausted no doubt by the effects of *Bad Girls* (its 1994 Anglo-American version of the American New York, NMOCA and California, UCLA exhibitions) for the next few years - or is it a mark of feminism's 'success' in academe (where we might note continued marginalisation via limited incorporation) that it is now absent from view in the ICA's attempts to mark what it defines as new? 'Justifications' about the indifference to the 'gender' difference are frequently *staged* in terms of the need to defeat or supersede certain conceptions of early 1970s feminism (humanist, essentialist, *sisterhood*). The stakes in these 'imaginary' battles are embodied through stereotypes about Women's Liberation in the 1970s positioned against a liberated transgressive, even perverse, *now* (as in *Bad Girls*) or, in academia, through forms of *rigorous* theorizing in which the ghoul of biological *essentialism* - even simple identifications / interests between women as women - must be subsumed to engagement with post-structuralist *Theory* via the Lacanian/semiotic model.

The negative effects of this *staging* of the stakes in feminism post-1968, mix well with the prevalent sexism of art school culture, and close down quickly any sustained attention to the very complex and engaged theoretical debates that feminist research has initiated and developed over the last twenty five years (or its linking back to women's struggles for equal rights and education since the mid-19C, including its recent re-evaluations of the twenties). Perhaps some will see this characterisation of a particular closure as echoing the old for and against Theory debates of the early eighties but what is absent now is the desire of both camps then to value and re-evaluate women's contributions to culture.

Supposedly, to be a feminist now necessitates a form of engagement with psychoanalytic questions of the formation of the subject (left ungendered) and the *feminine* (always problematised), without recognising or considering any critique of the investments of masculinity in the singular or plural. A commitment to the production of more research on women's activities as writers and artists is not necessarily part of the identi-kit. Lacanian psychoanalysis (including his own heretical followers) is the only orthodoxy acknowledged. An all too loyal exegesis replaces that recognisable angry witty punning voice of feminist critique which is/was not frightened to ask irreverent questions which intervene in dominant discourses, for which Rosi Braidotti and Meaghan Morris, amongst others, argue. Before dismissing this as just another form of generational conflict in the history of shifts in feminist engagement and concerns since 1968, perhaps we need to ask, is this a renewal of patriarchal authority re-entering through the subjection incurred by women engaging uncritically with the Lacanian legacy which Somer Brodribb mocks as another form of self-imposed psychic torture for women? In Lacan's writing of woman as lack, as an id(entity) which does not exist, are women

accepting their so-called abjection as 'woman'? Isn't this a further submission to women's status as a non-subject, as something unworthy to study except through men's problems with both 'woman'(concept) and 'women'(social beings)? For what is missing in much of the orthodox referencing of Lacan in art criticism and art history is that early and key feminist element of identifying the stakes for women across the 'woman'/'women' divide. The stakes lie in feminist work which names the 'technologies' of gender in a patriarchal society; identifies the investments in and reproduction of femininities; and articulates where interventions can and have been made.

The relative closure on feminist questions, which is the starting point of most critiques of Lacan, is interesting in comparison to the embrace of queer theory by the ICA. In queer theory (where lesbian and gay perspectives meet post-structuralist theories of the unstable subject) arguments are now clearly emerging about the plurality of gendered identities and identifications and the differing subject positions within the gaze (e.g.the work of Parveen Adams, Leo Bersani and Judith Butler).

Feminist variants of critiques of Lacan are no less prolific. They include a refusal to accept the Phallic symbolic as the only symbolic order (Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger); gender read away from the terms of 'securing' identity through the independent autonomous ideal (male) in terms of instability and 'performativity' (Judith Butler) ; a renewed interest in gendering fetishism and exploring its forms in women's activities (Lorraine Gammon and Merja Makinen); analysis of philosophical ideas of embodiment positioned against the mind/body split and stressing again an ethical politics (Susan Hekman or Rosi Braidotti) ; critiques of 'vision' and the West's overwhelming stress on 'visuality' (including new readings of Irigaray), to name but a few.

So how might these ideas enable fresh readings of the artists in *Mise en Scene*. For Claude Cahun, it might have enabled a reconsideration of her self-portraits beyond the staging of a 'self' as play or masquerade within the prescriptive and circumscribed Surrealist images of the muse/*femme-enfant*. To do this, one could highlight the different investments for a female Surrealist subject by the immediate contrast with other male surrealists, like Hans Bellmer. Bellmer's images and poupees (puppet/doll) were made after much of the work shown in the ICA exhibition (1934 onwards). Bellmer is well-known for objectifying his female *poupee* in both 'a reverential fetishism...and a sadistic degrading' (Hal Foster). The 'shock value' of their disturbing and violent dismembering has nevertheless been regarded as part of a committed Surrealist politics and, by Hal Foster, as a critique of both fascism and patriarchal authority. By comparison, Cahun's project to create a series of self-images as a third sex, virgin/androgynous/soldier, should not be confined to the personal but need to be read in terms of the Surrealist, anti-fascist and anti-bourgeois politics she embraced.

What were the political stakes for a woman to embark upon a visual exploration of figuring the body against the codes of bourgeois femininity and her colleagues fantasies of *woman* as loved and adored? When her portraits are seen as a 'mixing of seduction and voyeuristic threat' or a *Phallic woman*, are we not reading another version of the Surrealist enigma of *woman*? A feminist reading of Cahun's work might position it instead as a set of resistances and refusals enacted in and through identifications surrounding contemporary lesbian figures like the 'invert', the cross-dresser as well as a critique of the male Surrealist's view of *woman* as loved and adored.

Another reading might emphasise the collaborations and assumptions of identities of Claude Cahun/Lucy Schwob (her family name) with her stepsister Suzanne Malherbe/(pseudonym) Marcel Moore in the making of a new identity as an avantgarde artist. It may also have brought to the fore the poetry and literature produced by Claude Cahun in the 1930s, translating and presenting more of '*Aveux Non Avenus*' (*Avowals not Admitted*) or '*Les Paris Sont Ouverts*', explaining more of her political sympathies and allegiances in '*Contre-Attaque*' and for the underground resistance in Jersey in the fourties for which she was imprisoned. For, the relationships, literary, political and Surrealist between her writing, her photomontages and sculpture-objects are of interest in developing her importance as a theoretician and not just another spectacle of *Woman* through the series of self-portraits shown.

Perhaps too, it would open up the difference in the engagement of the two contemporary artists outside the overblown reference to a Surrealist reading of the *uncanny*. The chance encounter with a photograph was the starting point for the narrative coincidences at work in Tacita Dean's artworks *The Stowaway* and *The Martyrdom of St Agatha*. The interweaving of events, re-enactments in film and of her plans and research link the artist to identifications with her female subjects. The juxtaposition of *original* object, video and dubbing plans suggest an unresolvable narrative, but this impression is at odds with the narrative about the project provided by artist's statements to the catalogue. Apart from the fascination the subject engenders in the artist, the combination of essay and work leaves the spectator as if a witness to a research project, but strangely one which does not transform one's perceptions.

Perhaps a feminist reading would have opened up the critique of masculinity within Virginia Nimarkoh's appropriation and re-presentation of photographs of black and white people. Instead, her work is positioned separately within the catalogue as an intervention in *post-colonial* discourses of race developed in the writings of Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. The archetypal male traveller, the exile and migrant of modernity is replaced by the young black woman, suitcase in hand, hesitating outside an ironwork gate waiting to leave. In another of these large-scale photographs, the focused, if momentary, glance of 5 men of different races and in

different ethnic and Western dress is captured in profile as they march through the waiting room of what appears a colonial station. Nimarkoh's work relies upon the existence of the photo as an arbitrary 'documented fact' which negates apartheid, racist or colonial 'fictions' throwing certain historical relationships into question.

This exhibition emphasised for me, the dilemma which Roland Barthes identified in his concept of the 'punctum' - the impact of a photograph punching through time - because of its necessary and important relationship to the 'studium' - the cumulative general human interest in photography. For meaning to be established in the context of an exhibition, relying on the effect of the 'punctum' may well impoverish the 'studium'.

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A report on Slovenia's *City of Women* festival in 1995/6

Pauline Barrie

In Europe during the eighties many women's art groups formed and presented international events including symposiums, exhibitions, books and magazines. All the groups used these events to develop networks throughout Holland, Germany, Italy, Austria, Ireland and Spain. Many of the events succeeded in raising money through the development of a new European initiative, the European Capitals of Culture. This meant that new monies were available for cultural events within the declared capital and it made it more possible for women artists to access some of these monies in order to present their work.

Some of these groups from the eighties still survive today (see *n.paradoxa's* list of women's art organisations) and continue to co-operate for the benefit of women artists. Others have not fared so well. A common problem has been the uncertainty of any long-term funding, especially core revenue funding and many groups have simply folded under the sheer exhaustive attempts needed to retain women's art groups and their individual programmes on short-term project funding.

Although some infrastructures from the eighties have disappeared, others have developed. New models have been formed and new histories are developing. A very recent example is The City of Women in Slovenia.

The City of Women held its first festival of women's creativity in autumn 1995. It was a multi-media event embracing many International artists in an extensive programme combining film, video, theatre, performance, exhibitions, Literature, music and a Symposium. This extensive programme had moral and financial support from the Office for Women's Policy .

The City of Women was a welcoming and well-organised International event presenting new ideas of organising and working collectively to produce a rich, varied and diverse programme of creativity. This is not just a description of the programme itself but also fits the way in which the Slovenian women worked together and networked with international participants and artists. It successfully combined women's art from the east and the west and situated Slovenian women's art into a larger cultural framework.

The Office for Women's Policy was founded in July 1992 through a decree passed by the government of the Republic of Slovenia. This was a major victory for women working together from all different political persuasions to establish a government office which could strive to achieve sexual equality in all aspects of society. The Office for Women's Policy would implement equal opportunities at the highest levels of authority yet still retain an independent status within the government as a whole. But the focus of this independent office is to work towards equal opportunities for women and men both in legislation and in everyday life. Having such an office has a dramatic effect on many things and the City of Women, as a celebration of women's creativity, had a general feeling of financial stability and solidarity.

The Office for Women's Policy also acted as a focal meeting point during the week and distributed information and changes in the programme. The Artistic Director and Head of the Project, Ursula Cetinski worked closely with a number of other women and men as well as with the Director of the Office for Women's Policy, Vera Kozmik. The office's role as a central government force with a clear agenda for women was important. Slovenia is a small country which only declared its independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, causing over nine thousand people to emigrate. Yet it embarked on a path of profound political and economic transformation. The founding of an office for women's policy is very much part of this progressive situation as well as its willingness to support cultural events and projects like The City of Women.

The City of Women was organised by a group of men and women under the auspices of an Artistic Director and Head of the Project, Ursula Cetinski. Ursula Cetinski presented a programme which concentrated on women's authorship. It represented a festival entirely devoted to art by women within Slovenia but also focused on the social reality in which women's art is produced. The City of Women was able to co-finance and co-produce much of the overall programme enabling many artists to realise their own projects. Although by the nature of a festival which only lasts a week, financial support is only short term but it does act as a catalyst and focus supporting women's creativity and providing opportunities including an international audience.

The programme included artists like Bobby Baker, Meredith Monk, the Al Dente and a rich mixture of artists from Uruguay, Spain, France, UK, USA and Slovenia. A spectacular performance/installation was given by Ema Kugler. This Slovenian artist

took her audience to a huge Ford company warehouse on the outskirts of Ljubljana. In a space large enough to build an aircraft, the spectators were subjected to a ritualistic presentation involving the burning of wax effigies, a corridor of white wax dogs, a goddess, a strange beckoning figure pulling the audience down into the blackness of this huge space. A figure whose movement resembled that of a violin crab, beckoning but threatening as well. The corridor of dogs came alive with barking which became louder as the spectators were drawn in. A smell of burning wax filled the cold night air. This was a spectacle. A performance which presented strange futuristic figures, then two men their bodies, beautiful, stylised as they fought and ran in front of a video screen. In the darkness came long pillars of light which illuminated a series of nude women, posing white Greek pillars. The colour of their nakedness seemed surreal against the blackness of this space. Holding large terracotta urns which were held as if they were pouring fluids from them they slowly turned and went back into the darkness. Very quickly they were replaced by a large white wax Goddess and an industrial gas burner which was lowered from the ceiling. It began to burn the top of the head of the Goddess. The whole of the Ford factory building was now filled with the heavy smell of burning wax, the corridors of dogs now had spikes coming through their mouths as their own wax heads melted into metal dishes. This was a spectacle of performance work I had not seen before, biblical, ritualistic and a visual feast. The artist, Ema Kugler had worked with a large group of other artists to realise her project. Funded centrally by the City of Women and sponsored by the company Ford, it provided her with an opportunity to produce something on a grand scale. Her piece was the highlight of the week.

There was also some other stunning work presented by Bobby Baker whose *Kitchen Drama* performances took its Slovenian audience by storm. Her supportive workshops encouraged its participants to shop so that they could get collectively involved in her piece. The humour and *Englishness* of Baker's performance was finely balanced by the spiritual presentation from Meredith Monk. Except for her short verbal introduction, Monk launched straight into a non-verbal performance which took her voice and sound into a timeless zone which spellbound her audience with an assemblage of sound, fusing imaginary storylines with emotional tones. Her stories of women and the girl child captivated and beguiled an audience who gave her a standing ovation. Monk's performance was simply brilliant.

Innovative music, a performance of Alma (based on material left behind by a Slovenian writer, Alma Karlin) and a heart rendering piece by Darci Picoult who gave a revealing but moving account of the wonders of science and technology in relation to women who were injured when prescribed the drug, DES, in order to prevent miscarriages.

The festival enabled new writings to emerge, women's writings were published for the first time and *Veiled Landscape* revealed a rich and diverse collection of literature. *Stereo Tip*, an International exhibition was presented at the Mestna

Galerija in the centre of Ljubljana. Curated by Helena Pivec, Eva Maria Stadler and Lilijana Stepancic, it included both male and female artists. The intention was to show how attitudes have shifted towards the present time when feminism did not exclude men but supported work which embraced the same principles. This exhibition showed a selection of works by 21 artists including GRAM (the artists club from Graz, Australia) and that the works of art themselves looked at various stereotypes which were connected with "the subjectivity of the woman".

The exhibition tried to examine the stereotypes which surround the modern woman, the way she looks, her roles, her discourse and how these shift culturally. It attempted to present an exhibition of works in which the female stereotype can be seen. This exhibition has a bilingual catalogue which outlines the intentions of the curators and gives essays by the artists.

This was a festival which provided a rich programme of events, the spectacular mixing with quieter presentations, supported by the symposium and a wide range of evening music, films and videos.

The success of The City of Women is evident in that it has just finished its second festival. Again headed by the tireless and innovative Artistic Director, Ursula Cetinski it has provided a second International Event. The 1995 programme was dedicated to female creators from Western Europe and the United States, but 1996 presented a different situation. Their latest programme had a title *Two Images of One Panorama*. Concentrating on storytelling from traditional Bosnian songs their source comes from the ancient worlds of the Sami culture. Macedonian folk singers, Greek vocalists combined with theatre from Spain. Jenny Holzer and Julia Scher presented work alongside the *Old for New*, a video documentary by Zemira Alajbegovic and Neven Korda. The range presented shows a commitment to innovation and diversity making the week a challenge of artistic creativity.

The City of Women is now developing into an independent group which hopefully will continue to provide an annual festival which differs year by year but embraces the richness of creativity we have seen them present in 1995 and 1996. Financial independence does not necessarily mean that the City of Women will have a secure future but over the last two years they have provided one of the most exciting and innovative programmes to be found anywhere in Europe or the States. Their endeavours have certainly been appreciated by the international participants but also by the Office of Women's Policy. So much of our future as women in the world lies within each countries political framework so lets hope that the elections in Slovenia maintain their present structures, offering the Office of Women's Policy a continued role in the running of the country. With the strength offered by a government office, organisations like The City of Women will find financial support easier to gain, but more importantly will be able to strengthen the role which women play in the cultural industries both in Slovenia as well as on a more global scale.

As an independent spectator at the festival it was extremely well organised and the City of Women offered a supportive and professional model of what could be achieved. There generosity and care for detailed programming made the City of Women a pleasure to attend. This success over the last two years should enable 1997 to be an even bigger and more spectacular event.

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An Interview with Catherine de Zegher, curator of *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth Century Art, in, of and from the feminine*

Katy Deepwell

The interview took place in Kortrijk, Belgium in September 1996. *Inside the Visible* was an international touring exhibition, shown at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (Feb 1996); the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, October-December 1996) and The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth in 1997. Catherine de Zegher was the Director of the Kanaal Art Foundation in Kortrijk, Belgium before moving to become Director of the Drawing Centre in New York.

Katy Deepwell: Can you begin by telling me about how you began to work on the exhibition?

Catherine de Zegher: After working on the 20th century section of the exhibition *America: Bride of the Sun* (1992), Jean Fisher once asked me 'Have you ever wondered why you are interested in art from South America?' . I couldn't answer her initially but as I thought about her question, I realised that it has much to do with my situation in Belgium, and my own feelings of being marginalised although this was not something I was overly conscious of but something one realises after reflection. In a way, *Inside the Visible* arose from my experiences of working with South American artists, but instead of playing missionary over there, I realised that I had to confront my own understanding of the situation of women and how they feel in the art world. This is why I started to look at many many catalogues, books and exhibitions of women artists in the 20th century.

My background is in archaeology and art history and I spent some time working in archaeological sites and the restoration of monuments before we founded the Kanaal Art Foundation. In Belgium in the mid 1980s, most of the curators of *n.paradoxa* online issue no.1 Dec 1996

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contemporary art looked mainly to New York and North America for international exchanges. In 1988-89 when I began to be interested in showing contemporary art I too went to New York to establish an international programme. When I was in New York, I saw a Brazilian project at PSI and as I had the opportunity to meet South American artists for the first time, I thought I should try and work with some of the artists who I met and invite them to have a show. Perhaps, my identification with these artists was the result of my own feeling of marginalisation in relation to a dominant American mainstream. Through these initial connections with South America, through New York, I developed some strong relationships with South American artists and some of these artists were women.

Initially in Kortrijk, the Kanaal Art Foundation was housed in a huge textile factory. We then began to organise exhibitions all around the city, including the Beguinage. The first artist I showed was Cildo Meireles. At that time few artists invited from abroad came from different continents to Europe and America, we were thus setting a trend in parallel with developments in multiculturalism.

In 1992, I was invited to curate the twentieth century works in the exhibition *America: Bride of the Sun*. This was the Belgium government's exhibition to celebrate the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of America (Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, 1992) Paul Vandebroeck curated the 16th-19th century side of the exhibition. I was invited a year before the exhibition opened as the organisers realised that they had no purchase on the 20th Century in the exhibition. The questions we wanted to examine were: how does art function in the Conquista and how were the Flemish paintings used as propaganda material to accompany the military and economic conquest. With this idea in mind, we turned the exhibition theme around by structuring it in two parts: first, Europe looking at South America and then South America looking at Europe. We raised the question of how we, Europeans, might build up an imaginary view of South America and how the inhabitants of South America reacted to the Europeans both its army and the monks who accompanied them, and who were responsible for training native Indians to paint *Flemish* art also using feathers (in collages). We also emphasised that it was not a question of aesthetics but politics - not only how the West constructs an image of the Other but also how the Other was looking at us. We displayed maps, for example made in the 16th Century, e.g. Mercator and then I selected a lot of contemporary artists whose works were dispersed across the exhibition to emphasise the different voices on this subject.

Katy Deepwell: You seem to have continued many of these themes into *Inside the Visible* in several ways: by adopting a multi-cultural approach; and a view of the 20th century which is not linear coupled with an emphasis upon art as offering a possibility for a politics of resistance.

Catherine de Zegher: Yes, as with the *America* exhibition, I think it is important that one is aware of your own European position. There were times when I was selecting the exhibition, when I would not necessarily have selected an artist for my own aesthetic reasons but because there were curators from the same country as the artists who could tell me that this artist is really important for us nationally, even when she would have initially fallen outside my own criteria, in these cases, I felt it would be important to include such artists and it turned out to be good to do just that. What I mean by this is that the exhibition is more than a single perspective and that, as a curator, one shouldn't put your gaze alone on a work. This is why the exhibition is not reducible to one thesis, even, as Griselda Pollock has suggested recently in *Women's Art Magazine* (London, August/Sept 1996) that it could be summed up by Bracha Lictenberg Ettinger's thesis of the matrixial / *sharing*.

Katy Deepwell: What this exhibitions raises for me, is how many artists - particularly women - are often limited, in so far as their work may be known nationally but not internationally because their work doesn't appear in the so-called fashionable international mainstream, often because of very fixed selection procedures and criteria.

Catherine de Zegher: This is where other parallels emerge with the American exhibition. The themes used were very general, in order to provide a structure for comparing the different approaches taken by each artist beyond national boundaries. Similarly, I put great emphasis on each artist and every work was given a text in the catalogue to provide a bridge for the audience to the exhibition.

Katy Deepwell: This thoroughness is unusual as many catalogues of 20th century work offer only an introductory text and then a sequence of colour photographs (with the exception of one-person exhibition catalogues / monographs at major European and American exhibitions). Within this format, there is usually limited discussion of the situation of individual works within the argument of the exhibition based on the assumption that a discerning or knowing public should be able to walk around and find these links.

Catherine de Zegher: As a curator I am aware that setting up the exhibition is almost as if one is putting together a puzzle whereby the work should not disappear into one larger theory but should be considered a part. However, there are links which can still be made in terms of communicating a memory of women's art practice in the 20th Century, rather than its persistent erasure from collective memory.

Katy Deepwell: One American feminist I spoke to recently who saw the exhibition in Boston, told me that she regarded the exhibition as a new moment in

feminism. I think part of the reason for this was because American feminist art history has been dominated by the notion of recovery of artist's reputations e.g K.Petersen & J.J.Wilson or the early exhibition 'Women Artists 1550-1950' by L.Noehlin & A.Sutherland Harris. In this exhibition, instead of using key works strung together because of what their makers represent as a lineage of women, you have in this show emphasised correspondences between works in the show. Is the method of presentation to demonstrate a multiplicity of subject positions rather than a single theme or subject matter as a link?

Catherine de Zegher: Yes. When one chooses to show multiplicity, one also shows fragility, and forms of sharing ,collective experience- which could be seen as essentialist - but it is difficult to keep a balance between different characteristics. When I decided to do the exhibition it was extremely difficult to find a space in Belgium so I spoke to several directors in the USA. The only one who took it up was Milena Kalinovska at the ICA in Boston, who is from the former Czechslovakia and as a European in America understood the struggling and difficult positions I wanted to explore. It was very difficult for many male directors to understand what I was developing because I decided to work in an open-ended way. Many museums when they take on an exhibition idea need a complete outline and I wanted a situation where the institutions who would accept me could participate in developing the concept of the exhibition and selecting other artists to represent a diversity of positions.

Katy Deepwell : It seems that all the places Inside the Visible is being shown have women directors.

Catherine de Zegher: The only male curator is Gary Dufour, He is a Canadian, living in Australia and there he too has encountered the problem that many Australians were trying to adapt their work into readable works for approval within the international mainstream. His interest in the show was in the fact that it is possible for artists to keep their own (regional) identity and yet still be very contemporary (of the moment). It is necessary to recognise this factor in artist's lives in order to 'right' the historical account.

Katy Deepwell : One way I consider this problem is through its parallels to cooking in so far as one can make a contrast between multinational presentations and local cuisine. For example, if one were to position MacDonalds as equivalent to the international art world's diet - a homogenised, mass-produced product which no matter where it is served has the same qualities. Then one has to ask what space there is for local cuisine where the location gives the food very distinctive regional differences, e.g. since we are in Belgium and frites are served

here with mayonnaise rather than in Britain where salt, vinegar or ketchup is the norm. This is clearly not the best of local cuisine but the point is that one enjoys the differences of food or culture in different places, but it seems that now what we have is a MacDonald's / Pizza culture where conformity is the norm.

Catherine de Zegher: It's not only that: women are marginalised in relation to the dominant culture, be it regional or multinational because of sexual politics.

Katy Deepwell: So, are we back to the questions raised by feminist art history and how can we reconceive the relationship of women to modernism in the 20th century? In Britain, much of the scholarship has been divided between post-1970s work on contemporary art and the women's art movement and work on the second half of the 19th century, little attention has been paid to the 20th century as a whole. While there are exceptional projects in Europe like das Verborgene Museum which looks at women in Berlin in the 1920s and 1930s and some major projects on different nation states or groups covering the last 150 years, the national and time period model has dominated exhibitions. In blockbuster exhibitions like *American Art of the 20th Century*, *Italian Art of the 20th Century* etc, women are frequently marginalised or erased from the history of art altogether. The other feature of linear histories is also the way in which they are tied into national profiles whereas *Inside the Visible* cut across national boundaries, it doesn't seek to reproduce them.

Catherine de Zegher: Organising an exhibition like this raises many difficulties and part of the reason why many women are continually excluded is because it is necessary to travel to find out about their work. If I had wanted to select a more comprehensive view of the 20th century as a whole in many nation states, the exhibition would have had to have been twenty times bigger. An interviewer from *The Washington Post* asked me whether I had made a survey of which artists are important and I said no I'm trying to show a little fragment. If I was to be offered the whole of the Metropolitan Museum then maybe I could make such a survey show. But it would really be impossible.

Katy Deepwell: So, is the choice to cut an exhibition down into themes, a way of coping with the impossibility of such choices?

Catherine de Zegher: I set the show up visually using the themes but in such a way that when you are in the last section you can remember and refer back to the first. You can see that in every section there are self-portraits even though I'm developing other themes and correspondences between the works. There are self-

portraits in other sections but they are primarily in the first. I wanted to show women's self-portraiture not as just about representation but issues of time, space and identity to try to give possibilities to the reader on many levels. The problem with some thematic shows is that in a theme like 'the body' women are just shown as 'body' and not as mastering a discourse. I wanted to go against that idea by showing work like Avis Newman as there is resistance in the work - maybe you don't read it immediately but it's there. I also wanted to shift readings of these works from their habitual readings by bringing different things forward throughout the show linking them in new ways. If you compare Kobra and Hannah Hoch you could say they are both about dismantling the monument and notions of power and control - but so is Agnes Martin although she is not usually read like that but in terms of -isms or abstraction.

Katy Deepwell : Perhaps this is what people could mean when they say that this could be a new moment in feminism. Specifically, not reading women artists solely in terms of an additional area within a particular -ism (or modern movement) - which still is the basis for exhibitions and books which have been written through the 1970s and 1980s. So in many ways you are cutting across these categorisations.

Catherine de Zegher : I have always tried to cut across categories because I recognise the ways in which they are attractive as safe structures.

Katy Deepwell : But you are also employing other categories like Rosi Braidotti's 'nomadic subject' or Rosika Parker's 'subversive stitch' or Julia Kristeva's notion of the 'abject'.

Catherine de Zegher : Yes, one hangs on to these but they may turn out to be as terrible as the others even though at the moment they carry a necessary edge. Implicit within what I am doing is the need to constantly reshape, adapt and represent these constructs while looking for the ways in which they present cross-overs. You cannot say where or when the emotion or the category ends.

Its still very hard to put retrospectives of women together and its not just that they are women but because they are a specific older generation. There is a gap between the established figures of an older generation who are now in their sixties and those who are in their forties. This older generation have generally not had retrospectives and are not invited to many national/international exhibitions. There is a forgotten generation between their sixties and seventies now. Recently, Nancy Spero, who is 70 this year, said to me jokingly that it is only now when she is old and wrinkled with no sexual appeal that she is invited to be in the Whitney Biennale because she is now not threatening anymore - just an old lady.

Katy Deepwell : There has recently been attention to a group of women approaching or in their fifties like Valie Export, Marina Abramovic who have started to gain visibility through significant group exhibitions and retrospectives of their work in Europe.

Catherine de Zegher : But in Latin America, they jumped a generation between the group of older artists who survived the military dictatorships , had an incredibly difficult time but have large bodies of work and now when they want to show their work for the first time abroad , the curators have jumped a generation and want to show only younger women artists' work. For me the challenge now in institutions is to show more of this older generation and less of the younger who are constantly getting younger - being offered retrospectives now even in their 20s.

Katy Deepwell : By the time, this younger generation reaches their 40s we will have to have a massive museum expansion plan to show their work!

Catherine de Zegher: It is however true that there are now finally more retrospectives of older women. This is really the result of the feminist struggle that retrospectives of women are no longer a rare event.

Katy Deepwell : The emphasis upon historical memory is another unusual element in your exhibition because many of the women whose careers developed from the 1970s - cut history - emphasising the 1970s as a new present and a new historical moment - a ground zero from which to start again.

Catherine de Zegher : This seems now a big mistake. They murdered their mothers even more than many male artists. They cut away from their mothers, from what had happened in the immediate past to establish a new beginning. But you cannot say nothing happened before. If you do this, you need to see, you are establishing only one beginning when there are in fact many others. Where to begin and the idea of beginnings are extremely important notions as they imply repetition but what many of these women did was position themselves at an origin.

Katy Deepwell : By the early 1980s in Britain, there was a renewed attempt at linking 1970s feminism with earlier moments in the history of women; the suffragettes & the 1850s with the Victorian women who started schools, campaigned to enter the academy, organised campaigns for abolition and temperance. The Americans, for example, in the 1850s wrote the declaration of the rights of women. What is interesting for me is that there developed in art history in Britain as a result of this scholarship a strange dichotomy between the 1970s and the 19th century and it is only now that the 20th century is

starting to be explored again. What happened in the 20th century for women in Britain after they had first gained the vote in 1918, when the professions began to admit women and when women moved back into the organised labour market in large numbers in secretarial/office/shops jobs is now an interesting question.

Catherine de Zegher : The women artists in *Inside the Visible* I regard as having developed positions of general resistance in relationship to other dominant themes in the 20th Century: - dictatorship in Latin America, fascism in Europe, racism in America. I was trying to find another way of showing women in relationship to these key moments in 20th century history. As a Belgian, one is very conscious of the ongoing history of both fascism and racism. In this way the show is not linked specifically to the notion of women's history but more the history of different ethnic / minority groups - and this is not just a sexual politics. For example, I wanted to raise the question: how does the anti-Vietnam protests of the late sixties relate to a presentation of South American experience of resistance to dictatorship in the early seventies. These historical contrasts are between a trans-national situation and a regional one and vice versa. It is very difficult as an idea to show this. Homi Bhaba tries to show this transhistorical and transnational via the local and the global, but any work with the global needs to retain its sense of a local focus. One cannot show the regional without a view to the global. It is difficult to keep to present this space while retaining a broader view.

Katy Deepwell : I can see the ways in which you are attempting to do this in the space through contrasting works. For, example instead of putting Claude Cahun next to Charlotte Salomon to emphasis a shared historical time frame (the 1930s in Europe) you place Charlotte Salomon's work (her diaries of life as a Jew in fascist Germany) next to a work by Nancy Spero. But you selected 'Codex Artaud' rather than a more obvious choice which might have been 'The Torture of Women' (which emphasises experiences of women in Chile) emphasising differences in image and text and narrative rather than shared historical experiences of 'oppression'.

Catherine de Zegher : I have tried to shift expectations continually - that's my way of negating - of saying No. Of refusing to allow things to fall into the obvious categories. But that's also how you create complexity. This is also why I did not choose very well-known artists like Cindy Sherman but chose Claude Cahun in the hope people might recognise what she was doing at a different moment through Claude Cahun.

Katy Deepwell : However it seems necessarily to problematise this historically. You cannot as the ICA in London chose to do present Claude Cahun discussed exclusively through the gaze of Cindy Sherman (see 'Restaging the *Mise en Scene*' p.46 on)

Catherine de Zegher : Yes, That's totally wrong. What I was hoping for was instead of including such figures, their presence would be there and one could question the validity of such links amongst women artists from different times and countries.

Katy Deepwell : **Another correspondence which struck me was Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* video (1975) with the rolled clay pieces of Anna Maria Maiolino as a correspondence with the domestic but one which you do not see initially in the exhibition space - as they are not side by side - but one which occurs as one reaches the end of the exhibition.**

Catherine de Zegher : Sally Stein spoke very beautifully of this at the discussion about the exhibition at the CAA in Boston in February and I was happy that this came across. The architect, Paul Robbrecht, and I used to joke about the way the exhibition starts and ends with the kitchen. If he can see that maybe others can. I attach importance to these notions.

Katy Deepwell : **If Fascism is the key moment in the 1930s , the 1970s could be seen as a form of resistance to the bourgeois woman/suburban housewife.**

Catherine de Zegher : Yes. You should see the pamphlets of the fascists now in Belgium - their propaganda uses the image of a broom to try and put women back in the kitchen. When I was invited to a conference in Guadalafara, Mexico, they asked me to do something about domesticity. At first I was very angry and then I realised I could speak about the negative and positive aspects of domesticity and how they are used to signify different meanings. One of the images used by the Belgian fascists was a broom so I linked this with an image of Carol Rama and explored how domesticity was linked to politics and how difficult it is to read domesticity in a fixed way as a similar image could bring you to very different understandings of an idea , e.g. the category of the object.

Katy Deepwell : **Although there are many figurative works , the majority of the show could be said to be focused on works which address the senses rather than just the eyes : i.e. they are aural, tactile, spatial in the sense of installation/performance. Another feature of the exhibition is the large number of abstract works.**

Catherine de Zegher: Abstraction is rarely seen as within a model of resistance. Who would think this of Marlow Moss, Bridget Riley or Jo Baer? If it had been possible, I would have like to included even more abstract work.

Katy Deepwell : So this is another way you are also cutting against the grain. You have generally sought to offer a reading of the feminine as a point of resistance rather than an easy trap or a catch-all term for Otherness in opposition to a masculine norm. Or the remainder from a paradigm in which anything which does not conform with male-defined standards is called the feminine. For example, the idea whereby the feminine in abstraction would be indicated by the combination of certain colours, and frequently used to pigeonhole the feminine as aberrant Otherness.

What did you think of the MOMA show which looked at minimalist work in the 1990s called *Sense and Sensibility*?

Catherine de Zegher : That show stayed with the strong formal associations of minimalism with the grid and the art in it was never linked up to life nor to a resistance to the categories themselves. The exhibition instead took up male-defined categories and asked what have women done with them. What I am trying to say is women have done this, and let us consider what has happened to their work. It's a very different form of thinking. The way I worked on this exhibition was listening, picking things up, developing ideas and this was a problem for many male directors who couldn't grasp what I was going to do. But Milena took a risk. Only when the essay was written, 5 weeks before the show, was the form of the show finalised. I subscribe to the Indian notion of how you educate children, one does not fill a bucket, instead you light a fire. It's a very different idea. Lynn Zelevansky had really good intentions but it was again filling up the bucket, not trying to light a fire.

Katy Deepwell : It's a wonderful metaphor.

Catherine de Zegher : I hope that this way of working will be accepted more but it's very difficult to raise money on this basis. Some foundations notably Andy Warhol's who funded this project are prepared to fund such developing projects when you don't know where you are going but are continually reshaping and reworking. That's why I'm also interested in artists like Avis Newman, Anna Maria Maiolino or Mona Hatoum where it's not a question of having a fixed idea in mind when you start but it is only through work that the ideas appear.

Katy Deepwell : It seems to me you tried to echo in your curatorial strategy the processes of the artists.

Catherine de Zegher : That is absolutely true: I was working with open-ended processes. Cecilia Vicuna has also been very important in shaping the exhibition along these lines as has Jean Fisher, Catherine David and Benjamin Buchloh.

Katy Deepwell : The abstract works you have chosen are ones where process and language are foregrounded they're not the forms of abstraction where formalism is first, even Kobra, Eva Hesse, Mira Schendel - playing with language as form. This is a more conceptual approach - not Conceptualism. Is this also where the feminine subject appears as an instable subject?

Catherine de Zegher : Yes, absolutely, but whenever we try to define the feminine the difficulty is that we always appear to bend towards essentialist notions.....

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