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

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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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