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Papers from the panel Historiography/Feminism/Strategy at the College Art Association conference, 26th February 2000, New York. Organised by the CAA Committee for Women in the Arts

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Subject and object

What I’d like to do on this occasion is to focus on exhibitions, and more specifically on feminist curatorial practices as a research object. Feminist art history and theory has largely concerned itself with artworks and texts, overlooking this site, which has its own specificities, contingencies and even, in some instances, poetics.

To speak of feminist curatorial practice is clearly to speak of something new, something which has arisen in our lifetime. Yet it is an activity through which we can already trace 30 years of feminist engagement with art, with history, with theory, museology, communities of knowledge and much more.

I want to understand curating as both a practice and an object. It is, in the first instance a practice that - among the many ways we might conceive the concept of ‘practice’ - produces specific cultural texts. And many of these productions are, directly or indirectly, engaged with feminism’s own recent histories. Thus feminist curatorial practice - its processes and its outcomes - needs to be understood as itself an object for historiography (something that’s only just beginning to happen).

‘Space apart’

We don’t have much of a purchase on feminist curatorial activity as such because of the relative paucity of feminist exhibitions, especially those which command broad attention by virtue of scale, institution, prestige or related factors.

However, *vis-a-vis* this more relative absence within the field at large, I think we need to recognise its indirect presence: that is, the extent to which feminist research,
issues and methodologies may be folded into other curatorial projects, rather than existing in a designated space apart (where, of course, it is more readily identified as such.)

Unlike the labours of artists, theorists and art historians, I’m acquainted with few, if any, curators who are able to pursue feminist projects as the singular focus of their research and exhibitions projects. Yet if curatorial work is understood as a site of feminist practice, we are enabled to identify ways in which feminist issues, theoretical understandings and scholarship may wholly, importantly - or even just partially - inform or underpin quite a wide sphere of curatorial investigation, be it:-

* in the work of individual curators, many of whom have long-standing feminist commitments
* in exhibitions the subject of which is framed in quite different terms (e.g. landscape, cultural memory, etc.)
* or in feminisms’ allegiances and intertwinings with other critical sites in culture – nationalisms and internationalism postcolonial struggles, multiculturalisms, gay rights, to name a few.

In any of these instances, we may find the impact of feminism as something folded in or partnered, rather than singular or a space apart. Further, vis a vis the term ‘strategy’ in the topic of this panel, we might consider the ways that the ‘folding in’ of feminism itself returns as a kind of ‘stretching out’.

**Models**

I do, however, want to turn to some models of feminist exhibitions. And here I’d have to say, we don’t have very many models or we don’t have enough models.

In the 1970s, public institutions everywhere faced unprecedented challenges to their exhibitions and collection policies for their paltry representation of women’s art. (We might want to remember here the revealing statistic that, in the 1969 Whitney Annual - a watershed year in terms of focusing this state of affairs - of the 143 artists in the exhibition, 8 were women.) A corollary move centred on the need to frame and present work by women artists, and this often took the form of survey exhibitions, often mounted as collective projects, sometimes by museums, sometimes with guest curators. Today, with presentational histories we can build upon, there is far less critical viability for an exhibition whose curatorial thesis is exhausted once the commonality of gender has been identified.

An approach related to the survey is one in which an additional element has been incorporated e.g. women and video. In such survey shows - as also often is the case of solo exhibitions - the specifically curatorial initiative may be occluded behind a kind of curatorial ‘transparency’: that is; the viewer is invited to see ‘through’ to the art itself, eliding the exhibition itself as a text.

A further model (following the lines of feminist art history) has been the recuperation of women’s practices, particularly within art movements from which
women’s contributions have been diminished. This approach may proceed as an ‘adding on’ to the canon (women and minimalism, surrealism, etc.) but might, more rigorously, interrogate the very processes of canon formation. In a development more dominant in recent years, there has been a shift away from gender exclusivity through a foregrounding of politics of gender representation. And we can also note a curatorial attention to feminist work not conceived in the “generic” but through very specific topics of investigation. In short, we can see how developments in feminist theory and in feminist art historical models find their way into exhibition practices.

But less often do we see exhibition practices as themselves theoretical enactments, or that might be understood in terms of a poetics, an act of re-vision and re-making, a making anew.

**Exhibition poetics**

In this light, I’d like to spend a moment discussing a specific exhibition, Catherine de Zegher’s *Inside the Visible*, which I think is of interest and importance both for things that it does, and doesn’t, do’, of which I’m able here to cite only a few:

* the exhibition retrieves some astonishing work by a number of women artists (e.g. Claude Cahun, Carol Rama, Charlotte Salomon) who were marginalised in the histories of the periods in which they worked. This is not in order to ‘correct’ an existing canon, nor to accumulate ‘great women’ but to identify and articulate a body of practice that doesn’t ‘fit’ past histories and current debates, which has existed in its byways, and whose ‘non-fit’ speaks to aporias within modernism, and indeed within contemporary feminist theory.

* in gathering together works from three periods – the 1940s, the 1960s/70s and the 1990s, all identified as periods of particular political urgency – the narrative of generations of women’s history being constructed is not the one we’ve become familiar with of late, of succession and superseding, but a way of understanding links and connections between practices in different times and place, through the kinds of affinities the exhibition identifies.

* the exhibition is composed exclusively of work by women artists, but the unifying element doesn’t rest with gender but rather with characteristics of this aesthetic production, further identified as a strategy of practice vis a vis other norms, not as a feminine ‘essence’. In this way, the exhibition makes its case for a practice in, of and for the ‘feminine’, on the side of women.

* the thesis of the exhibition arises from and through the artwork, that is, through its materialities, spacialities, haptic properties, iconography, etc. (rather than, as too often the case, the other way around, art pressed into service as illustration to a pre-established theoretical argument). Thus the exhibition is not a mere ‘fastening’ of art and theory but is itself a necessary form.
**Potential site**

In concluding, I’d like to try to think feminist curatorial practice as a potential site, a space for speculation, for local contingencies, for new structures of knowledge and pleasure, and, more largely, for poetics. There aren’t many models of such a practice around, within feminism or elsewhere, so I would like to give the last word to de Zegher, in appreciation for her conception of the possibilities, and realisation, of the curatorial process as “a space of amazement”