

n.paradoxa

online, issue 20

April 2008

**Editor: Katy Deepwell**

Published in English as an online edition  
by KT press, [www.ktpress.co.uk](http://www.ktpress.co.uk),  
as issue 20, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*  
<http://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadoxaissue20.pdf>  
April 2008, republished in this form: January 2010  
ISSN: 1462-0426

All articles are copyright to the author  
All reproduction & distribution rights reserved to n.paradoxa and KT press.  
No part of this publication may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or  
by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying and recording,  
information storage or retrieval, without permission in writing from the editor of  
n.paradoxa.

Views expressed in the online journal are those of the contributors  
and not necessarily those of the editor or publishers.

Editor: [ktpress@ktpress.co.uk](mailto:ktpress@ktpress.co.uk)  
International Editorial Board: Hilary Robinson, Renee Baert,  
Janis Jefferies, Joanna Frueh, Hagiwara Hiroko, Olabisi Silva.  
[www.ktpress.co.uk](http://www.ktpress.co.uk)

## List of Contents

Issue 20 (April 2008)

<b>Gisela Weimann</b> Shared and/or Divided Times: Questions and Answers and Europe in Exile	4
<b>Brigitte Hammer</b> Shared Times II / Pictures and Sculptures	12
<b>Moira Roth</b> Widening the Spiral: Musings and Readings in a Berkeley cafe, California, March - April 2007	15
<b>Katy Deepwell</b> More than Seven Urgent Questions about Feminism	24
<b>Sanne Kofod Olsen</b> Feminist art in Denmark a short introductory history and an interview with <b>Kirsten Justesen</b> , (artist, born 1943)	30
<b>Eli Bartra</b> Displaced or Nomadic Subjects	36
<b>Ramona Novicov</b> Three Female Hypotheses of the Romanian Avant-Garde	43
<b>Ursula Neinhaus</b> Preserving, Describing, Conserving Cultural History and Making it Accessible FFBIZ, The Women's Research, Education and Information Center, Berlin	51
<b>Mercedes Replinger</b> A False Interview with Real Answers	54
<b>Amaya Martínez de la Escalera Castells</b> THE DYNAMICS OF A LEGACY Living where you don't belong	64
<b>Concha Jerez</b> Installed Ideas	70
<b>Gabriele Kamper</b> Equality - a call to and from all politicians	73

# More than Seven Urgent Questions for Feminism

**Katy Deepwell**

## **What role does feminist art criticism play in transforming ideas about women artists?**

In 1996, after I had been writing art criticism about women artists for nearly a decade, I set up the online journal *n.paradoxa*. *N.paradoxa's* purpose was to create a space for international discussion about the varieties of feminism(s) - known collectively as feminist theory - in relationship to the feminist art practices of contemporary women artists. I chose the web initially with the idea that it could be a place for this kind of exchange in ideas. The journal developed into a print form in 1998 - as this is the lingua franca of the art world - and is still going today. The purpose of creating a platform for an international dialogue in which feminist art produced by women artists from different parts of the world could be discussed was to challenge certain - apparently fixed - lines of enquiry in Anglo-American discourse about the recent history of feminist art.

In spite of the growth of women artists in numbers and strength in the last three decades, the lack of serious critical attention to their work remains a major problem and their invisibility or neglect as artists is secured by the lack of scholarly writing about their projects. The journal publishes in-depth articles and interviews as well as book reviews and artist's projects from all corners of the world in order to provide not just visibility but much greater analysis of contemporary women artists' works internationally.

The contribution of women artists to transforming art's aesthetic and political discourses remains an under-researched area - in spite of the volume of work the feminist art movement and feminist art historians have produced in the last three

decades. If one looks for a "history" of the feminist art movement in Germany, one can find very few articles and in spite of some fantastic major exhibition catalogues there is no book which offers an overall picture. By contrast, the US has produced many books outlining East coast versus West coast histories of feminism, often laying claim to a central role in the development of a feminist art movement and ignoring or refusing to comment on art made in Europe at the same time.

### **Should the nation state serve as a model for how we understand the different histories and forms of feminist engagement in the visual arts in the last 3 decades?**

What role does art criticism play in this picture? Art criticism has and can transform perceptions about women artists, when it is not engaging with gossip about the artist's personality, looks or family/sexual problems, but with the content and aesthetic strategies of the work itself and thereby the contribution these make to art itself. While too often today art criticism appears to be an extension of marketing or promotional tools, its contribution in framing how contemporary art is understood, how exhibitions are seen, how knowledge(s) and assumptions are disseminated beyond the small communities who created or saw the works or a show and into much larger patterns of national/international cultural exchange should not be underestimated.

While art criticism is generally thought of as reviews of exhibitions in newspapers, this is not the only form of critical discourse: the scholarly texts found in books, monographs and catalogues, TV programmes, radio broadcasts, copy from web and print art journals all contribute. *n.paradoxa* was initiated with the idea that it would continue the work - in terms of an engagement with what constitutes feminism - already begun in several feminist art journals like *Heresies* (USA); *LIP* (Australia); *Women's Art Magazine* (UK); *Ruimte* (Netherlands) - all of whom had discontinued by the time it began publishing. Many of the women who were behind these journals' foundation and greatest successes are from the generation born between 1940-1950. Their work and the examples they offered were very important to me as I conceived my own model for *n.paradoxa*.

### **What and where are the legacies of feminist art from the 1970s?**

Increasingly today, any writer who wants to engage with feminist art or art criticism it seems must reference American/Anglo-Saxon models first. The imbalance in literature towards America and the numbers of publications on American feminist art encourages this - as does the dominance of the US in the art market internationally. There have been valiant attempts by many feminist scholars and curators around the world to demonstrate the emergence of Indian, Mexican, Taiwanese, Australian, Canadian, Hungarian, Japanese, Russian, Slovenian, Austrian, Spanish and Swedish forms of feminist art and to offer the specific political

debates which inform the work and record their different histories. *n.paradoxa* has been tracking and making visible this work for 10 years now. This work goes largely unheeded by most American scholars, even when published in English and widely disseminated. These presentations count as significant interventions in the development of local and nationally-based art histories, even when they do not succeed in transforming or producing a more internationally focused understanding of feminism. Even in tendencies which express the desire to have a "global" feminism, a critical regionalism emerges where the 5 continents of the world are treated as a new framework. How is this any different from First/Second/Third World dynamics or the tendency to celebrate the North over the South? As much as feminists scholars seek to align themselves within certain legacies, there is a need to avoid reproducing their faults and blindspots, for example, accepting and repeating the same key examples of individual artists and works.

**How does feminism - specifically feminist art practice, theory and criticism - renegotiate the constant framing of feminism in terms of a local/national politics and take account of the significant transnational/ international dimensions to these questions?**

What the legacy of feminist enquiry has been and how it might continue to develop in the future is part of this question about what feminism itself is as a history, a politics, a set of questions or methods and approaches. The feminist project is far from over. It transmutes and changes constantly with each new contribution to the field from intellectuals all over the world. I see feminism and feminist thought as an ongoing continuum which was always and will continue to be fractured by real disputes, different political camps, different interest groups and different forms of social and cultural methods of engagement both intellectual and activist. Difference here between feminist perspectives is a strength and not a weakness, the arguments ultimately provide a means to make progress and potentially to find new solutions. Conformism to a single, depoliticised, primarily liberal view of what feminism represents may present the biggest danger to any healthy feminist debate. Put another way, this view of feminism may represent a stagnation and the "acceptability" of one form of feminism as a series of uncontested and ill-conceived but easily digested set of formulations.

**Can feminism be understood only in terms of generational groups? Or does any model of a particular generation dissolve when it is really questions about feminist politics which count?**

I am 10-20 years younger than most of the artists in this book, born in 1962 at the moment of the cold war Cuban missile crisis. What 1968 and the 1970s means to me is both lived experience (as a child/teenager) but also, in fact, a history recovered through the publications and knowledge gained through conversations about a group

one or two generations removed from my own "peer" group. I have been and still am both interested and inspired by their collective and individual work. I recognise their energy and effort in transforming and changing what art itself might be, what could be spoken about and what could be made - with all the irreverence, sense of enquiry and imagination it contained and how this clearly offered another point of view to what I saw or perceived was the mainstream in which sexism just is the way business operates "as usual".

### **So, which generation of feminism am I?**

In American terms, I'm second-wave - not part of the 1970s and not part of the emergence after the mid-1990s of a self-defined third-wave. My encounter with feminism historically in the early 1980s coincides with the emergence of post-colonial theory, with post-structuralist thought and with French feminist thought at a time when many feminists were arguing about what constituted essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches in feminist art strategies but it follows the sustained critique of racism and sexism (women's oppression) which the 1970s provided. My intellectual inheritance becomes ever more apparent to me as a form of locating my "generation" in "pro-theory" terms. However, from the point of view of social history or even a sociology of art, I would question if a generation can be seen in any simple homogenous terms. People from the same generational groups do not always have the same history of ideas or intellectual resources, nor do they have the same political, spiritual or social beliefs, their experience of marriages, births or deaths do not happen at the same time, they do not always share lifestyle choices nor do they experiment with sex, drugs or rock'n'roll in the same way, nor do they have the same value systems for assessing their achievements or failures.

### **Would a reformulation of family politics serve us any better?**

Art history is littered with examples of father / son models, of successions handed from one generation to another. It looks convenient at first but it has a crazy logic when used to link the emergence of work produced in quite disparate European capitals and amongst different generational or peer groups. Or is the question of generational models really a means to create avant-gardes and followers and to establish pioneers and followers in the field of art history?

Perhaps, sibling rivalry - as much as peer group pressure - would be a better model. It has a large part to play in differentiating women from each other. How do siblings fit into generations? Any simple decade-based view of a generation is constantly fractured by the differences between women within family groups. Teenagers and adolescents thrive on being misunderstood, rebellious and "different".

Some versions of feminism have promoted feminists of the 1968 generation as making a cut - an absolute separation from their mothers, specifically their values and ideals where it was accepted that a woman should subjugate her own identity to

the needs of her family. This rejection by the daughter of their mother could lead us into some classic Freudian territory in which the result, an identification with their father and a downgrading of their mother, is an attempt to secure their place in society/history. I remain unconvinced by the value of these models as a means to explain feminism's emergence. For me, this is often how patriarchy reproduces itself, securing the invisibility of the mother and the relative weakness of the daughter - especially when she herself became a mother. For me, feminism has to be about a realignment of the mother and daughter relationship and a re-evaluation of the difficulties of this relationship in and against patriarchy. Women have to reassess and learn again to respect and value their mothers and grandmothers, finding out what they have contributed to society, especially given several generations of women post-war whose lives have been dedicated to both work and family. I see myself as having many intellectual "mothers" and my learning curve within feminism (in the early 1980s) coincided with feminist explorations of its 150 year legacy of political struggle across Europe and in the US. However this is not without tensions, the ambivalence of some feminist mothers to their "daughters" continues and if feminism is not about redefining the mother-daughter relationship into a more positive equation in/against patriarchy, how can we expect our "daughters" in the future to continue the legacy of feminism and not reproduce the same cut by establishing a distance or separation from our work. It seems imperative that a new cross-generational perspective based on political alliances about feminist politics is vital if feminism wishes to avoid being identified solely with one generational group. A renegotiation of the mother-daughter relationship across generations is also necessary alongside a greater respect for the incredible contradictions and difficulties of combining a working life with family and caring commitments to others.

### **Is feminism better described an idea of perpetual revolution and political activism?**

The idea of perpetual revolution (a Marxist-anarchist legacy) and what it might mean to be a "student" activist certainly appealed to me as I went to art college, went on marches to stop nuclear weapons, joined campaigns against racism and fascism in the UK and visited Greenham Common, organised my first conference on 'Feminism and Art' and took an active part in the student union by helping organise student actions (work-ins which deliberately echoed the Hornsey art school protests). I did not see feminism could be "solved" and made redundant by bureaucratic remedies to change women's economic or social status even though I recognise how some of these attempts have succeeded in changing women's lives and opportunities - in spite of the social backlashes against them and verbal hypocrisy used to resist any change.

When I began speaking and writing about feminism in art in Thatcher's Britain in the mid-1980s, I was frequently asked when the need for feminism would be over, hadn't equality been achieved? So, I would reply (to art students), where was the equal

pay for women artists' works, the volume of women artists' one-person shows in kunsthallen, the selection of women artists in equal numbers as men to represent their country in international biennales, and the constant cover stories about the "great undiscovered woman artist genius"? It's still relatively straightforward to demonstrate that equality has not been achieved by any simple statistical measure - even though the figures have substantially changed for the better and women artists are not only more visible but more visible in greater numbers in the international art mainstream than ever before.

I was also told that women could do anything now we had elected one woman prime minister - you had only to be tough, ruthless and better than the competition - so what did we need feminism for? Feminism (or any collective model of political action) was seen as a sign of weakness in the midst of a selfish and aggressive individualism fostered by an entrepreneurial spirit (and Thatcher's trade union bashing) - a politics for those who could not succeed in the "real" world. This is the exact opposite of any idea of collective political action - demonstrated so forcibly post-1988 by the fall of so many regimes in Eastern Europe - but it is worth remembering that it was used very successfully in the UK in the mid-1980s to defeat the left, undermine trade unionism and diminish or curtail the impact of any collective political protest on the streets. Forms of collective political action have again re-emerged in email campaigns, on internet sites, and in mass street protests against globalisation, destruction of the environment, capitalism, and war. It might seem as though in 2007, the legacy of 1968 is remembered but in 1988 the same questions were also asked in a very different cultural climate. More recently, in certain debates, activism has been set against theory. It seems a false distinction, as protest is never just a praxis, it is always theoretically informed and theories are always used to justify political positions and spread their influence.

### **As a "pro-theory" feminist I ask myself constantly at what level of political activism am I really engaged in transforming feminism for the future?**

This paper was presented at the Symposium *Geteilte Zeit: Kunstgeschichte als Internationaler Dialog / Shared Times: Art History as International Dialogue*, at the European Academy in Berlin, 25 - 28 March 2008. This text is available in German in the book Gisela Weimann (ed) *Geteilte Zeit: Fragen und Antworten* (Edition Eselsweg, 2008).

Copyright © : Katy Deepwell

N.Paradoxa : Issue No. 20, 2008