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10 May

First European
Assembly
of Contemporary
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This Time We Talk About Gender

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French National
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First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres

Mapping Material Conditions & Ideological Background of Gender Inequalities

Summary of the meeting on 8 March

This document produced by DCA — French national network of contemporary art centres, is a summary of the discussions held during an online roundtable on 8 March, 2022, in the framework of the First European Assembly of Contemporary Art Centres.

The video recording of these discussions is available on:
<https://europeanartassembly.org/en/programme/1>

Discussion 1

Angela Dimitrakaki & Elke Krasny

Chairwoman: Julia Morandeira

The Historical and Socio-Political Conditions of Gender Inequality and Exclusion

Julia Morandeira: The genealogies of gendered labour in the artistic and cultural field are fuelled by rampant neoliberalism and lurking precarity. Cultural and artistic work practices and its institutions uphold this gendered unequal divide of labour, as can be seen not only in the gender inequality present in directing positions and economical retribution, but also in the important amount of invisibilised and enthusiasm-driven overworking that it feeds on, which is traditionally perceived as feminized work and largely undertaken by precarious bodies. This underlying reality still stands in stark contrast with the glorification of a few successful individuals, the proliferation of exhibitions of women artists or feminist thematics, or the widespread and mainstream endorsement of feminism and social justice by art institutions. This is a general picture that the pandemic has violently exposed and, in many aspects, worsened, though it has also opened some cracks for feminist intervention, transformation, and speculation. What are the urgent questions regarding gender and labour in the artistic field that we should be tackling? What are the masculinist grammars haunting this field? What are the wounds that need to be addressed and repaired?

Angela Dimitrakaki: There is a need to rethink and understand the history of art institutions in relation to feminist politics. It is difficult to maintain clarity in an age of accelerated political change. Feminism's first task is to interpret the political juncture so that strategies concerning the advance of feminist values, which have been attacked for many years now, continue as a realistic possibility. Susan Watkins' exemplary research article "Which Feminisms?"¹, which looks at the development of global feminism, demonstrates that the observation of Audre Lorde that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"² needs to be taken very seriously in examining the "integration project" for feminism that pushed for or accepted an institutionalisation and a pacification of its oppositional militant side. This had a significant impact on how feminist art developed under American hegemony and the star of postmodernism: labour ceased being of interest and sexuality dominated.

1. *New Left Review*, #109, Jan/Feb 2018

<https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii109/articles/susan-watkins-which-feminisms>

2. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, pp 110–114, (1984) 2007.

Labour was only revived as a key point after capitalism's crisis began being felt in advanced economies.


We need to resist the values that sustain the contemporary capitalist system, and specifically competition. Funding policies pit women or institutions against each other. In recent years, the art field has witnessed outrageous precarity, only exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and remilitarisation. Yet this level of precarity was concomitant with the democratisation of the art field, which was simultaneously a feminisation. For many parts of the West, the growing numbers of art graduates meant that more women entered the field. Growing numbers were essential, as observed by Gregory Sholette, for the great “dark mass” of invisible arts producers to exist so that the few stars get shown.³ We need to rethink the definition of an art worker. Meritocracy, as a capitalist value, sustains competition.

The main wounds to be repaired relate to the internal fractures of feminism. The pluralisation of feminism into feminisms is a legacy of the alliance between postmodernism and feminism, which eventually locked feminism into so called identity politics, and has been used as the system's chief strategy of “divide and conquer”. This has led to the use of antithetical phrases such as “imperialist feminism”, “neoliberal feminism” or “white feminism”. Can we then imagine or accept a “fascist feminism”? If we are to think about feminism as the end of women's oppression and exploitation, we must mend the fractures, de-diversify. We should discuss what feminism is, and where it is that we are moving. We need a feminist realism that looks dialectically at women's role in production and social reproduction.

Elke Krasny: It is important to act against the neoliberalisation of minds and bodies that has been so entrenched and normalised. This invisible poison needs to be called out, and we must be wary of how it erodes the possibility of imagining life differently. Competition is its most important factor, and the result is individuals in total isolation. We need a lot of realism, which can become a source of optimism that is not utopian, but one that understands that we can't take anything for granted. Continuation is not guaranteed.

Contemporary art centres are being confronted with the implications of what it means that “art” was split from life by modern epistemic and cultural structures such as disciplinary art history and museums. This stems from the belief that art is not considered labour. This split is of a deeply gendered and masculinist nature. The marginalised majority, most of whom are women, were excluded from the very idea of what art is, and who makes it. While this has been challenged for centuries, the idea that art is autonomous and separate from the toils and burdens of everyday life has largely remained intact. How will contemporary art centres work differently so art becomes part of life?

3. Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press Books, 2006



It is important to establish a list of both feminist and gendered issues. Gender, which concerns not only women but genders in plural, is a feminist issue. Infrastructure is a feminist issue. Cleaning is a feminist issue. Leadership is a feminist issue. When we think about curating and art centres, programming is a feminist issue. Funding is a feminist issue. Resources are a feminist issue. Representation is a feminist issue. Publics, audiences, and communities are feminist issues. What will it take so that all those who are producing and reproducing the institutions of contemporary art centres understand these issues as feminist? How will this change art centres? Everyday labour needs to change in the form of long-term dedicated transformation that works towards real healing, not simply as an intervention which refers to a militarized masculinist term related to a short-term action.

Climate change is gendered. What does this mean for contemporary art centres? It raises questions on how they allocate resources and their carbon footprint. Covid-19 is gendered. War is gendered. Austerity is gendered in its relation to capitalism and fascism. How will contemporary art centres respond in a long-term and sustained way- to historic junctures, to the “now-time”, to futurity, to the “not-yet”?

Julia Morandeira: What are the different temporalities of feminist work and change, beyond immediacy and urgency? Regarding the need for the “long-term”, what practices of duration need to be instituted and recognized? The “not-yet” is a temporal vector that engages both with the past, the production of potential and desirable futurities from a situated position in the present. What are the chronic, somatic practices that react to forms of care but also violence? There is a need for new vocabulary that reflects on this.

Elke Krasny: We should think about these notions in the everyday practicalities of people that work in contemporary art centres. What is the temporality of “no longer”, and what do we need to get rid of in order to make these places human-friendly or nature-friendly? A lot of the working conditions are precarious, based on short-term contracts or labour conditions that reflect the project-based economy of the art field in general. Art centres find themselves operating under conditions of a project-based funding logic that make it impossible to have long term employees. That we cannot trust that we have a job forever is part of the art field. This system relies on exhausting people, making them work very fast, very hard, and making them work more, to complete projects - and to produce *other* projects. This is a sustained but very unsustainable mode of working. One needs to understand what one doesn't want anymore in order to get rid of certain temporalities.

Angela Dimitrakaki: The prevalence of the “project” as a framework of production in the artworld relates to the issue of competition. A lot of things have been stressed about the archive. I am critical of any lineage that focuses on

individualism. There are histories of displacement that we will have to deal with at an amplified level that we have not seen before in art institutions. These should not be dealt with on an individual level.

But the principal struggle is to decolonise the concept of temporality that we use in feminism from that of a modernity of lateness and of development. Most people will talk about the “third world”, about a modernity that hasn’t come and one that is at risk from those who are coming to undermine it: migrants from the wrong places. This division is fictional in that it misrepresents, distorts, or conceals both history and how capitalism works. It is our task to ask why development in one part of the world is actually underdevelopment elsewhere. By doing that, we move art away from the realm of leisure.

We should be sceptical of the notion of cyclical time brought forward in today’s postmodern idealist revival. Death from war or the pandemic is a tragedy that is classed, that is racialised, that can be blamed on specific material conditions. Linearity has been forgotten about and has received a bad name. Yet, within the framework of feminist realism is the question of generations. The goals of feminism won’t be met within our lifetime: it is an inter-generational struggle. This is where the art institution comes in: it is where choices are made about civilizational inheritance and the question of preservation.

Elke Krasny: Here we are speaking not so much about contemporary art centres but about museums. They invest in the prolongation of the lifetime of artworks via strategies such as conservation and restoration. They invest in making sure that the climate for the artworks is good even if humans are suffering. Prioritisation has to do with temporality: what is being restored first, how are these decisions made based on ethical, political, and moral criteria? Will we no longer restore fascist or sexist works? Taking away time is also a way of healing wounds. While acquisition is important, so is finding out what is actually already there. Most museums don’t even know what they have. This deep storage has a chrono-political dimension. While we are creating conditions for ecocide and a sixth mass extinction, some of the species that are already extinct survive in the collections of natural history museums. All of this is food for feminist realism.

Discussion 2:

Xabier Arakistain & Elisabeth Lebovici

Chairwoman: Julia Morandeira



How to Exhibit as a Feminist?

Julia Morandeira: This conversation moves to discussing feminist methodologies, gestures, policies, positions and also forms of disobedience that can provide concrete and situated examples that go beyond the dominant issue of representation towards an understanding but also an undertaking of feminism as a practice, while sharing specific strategies and examples in writing, curating, organizing and educating, that help us overcome this topic of representation. How might we curate feminist exhibitions and affront sex, gender, sexual identity and race inequality, in a manner that surpasses mere representation in institutional programmes?

In her answer, Elisabeth Lebovici refers in particular to the exhibition *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and the Feminists Video Collectives in France in the 1970s and 1980s* curated by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi, which worked together with the Centre Audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir in Paris that was founded in 1982, took place at LaM (Lille, France, 5 June – 22 September, 2019), and the Museo Reina Sofia (Madrid, Spain, 25 September, 2019 – 27 July, 2020).⁴

Xabier Arakistain: It is important to realize that gender is rarely quoted as an analytical category. It seems that if you are talking about gender you are talking about women, and if you talk about feminism, you are also talking about women. Rather, feminism is about denouncing social sexual relations that produce the discrimination the oppression and exploitation of women by men. We should have clear concepts to politicize well. Intersectionality is one of the characteristics of contemporary feminism. The French materialist feminists were aware that all these categories, of sex, gender, sexual identity, race, ethnicity, class and age are intertwined and operate at the same time. They do not exist in a vacuum.

Women in Abstraction which took place at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (*Elles font l'abstraction*, 19 May – 23 August, 2021) and the Guggenheim Bilbao (22 October, 2021 – 27 February, 2022) and *The EY Exhibition: The World Goes Pop* (17 September, 2015 – 24 January, 2016) curated by Jessica Morgan at the Tate Modern in London, are two opposite ways of doing shows about women and feminism. *The World Goes Pop* didn't exclude women as a category like *Women in Abstraction*, which was an only women's show. It was an exercise in rethinking

4. <https://www.musee-lam.fr/fr/les-muses-insoumises>
<https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/defiant-muses>

what Pop Art is, and was good example of what it can mean to do a feminist show. Simultaneously, for an artist such as Mari Chordà to be included, who received little to no attention in her home country, was an embarrassment for institutions in Spain, which is uplifting to see. It is problematic to put women artists apart because they always end up being a subcategory: operating between the canon and the subcategories. By reducing feminism to things done by women, you are depoliticising feminism.

The exhibition as a telephone listing does not communicate anything or create a discourse, but rather an emptier space. This manner of creating exhibitions worked in the early 80s, because it was important to visualize the work of women artists. We must think not only about exhibition making but about art in a feminist perspective. We are going through a new period of essentialization. We should disclaim the notion that to be a feminist you have to be a woman, and the transmission of feminist knowledge should always be considered.

Julia Morandeira: It is not the same to organize an exhibition on women artists, and to install and organise an exhibition as a feminist. How should a contemporary art institution be, perform, structure, or speak?

Xabier Arakistain: Françoise Collin reflected on relating art and feminism through two effects. The Duchamp effect shows that in order to decide what is or isn't art, you must have authority. Women have historically not had this power. We must develop strategies that permeate the art world.

Q&A with the audience:

Antonio Cataldo: I wanted to go back to Elke Krasny and ask about the “marginalised majority”. Isn’t it dangerous to speak about the marginalised majority? We recently closed an exhibition curated by *Queer World* here in Oslo, an organisation working for queer minorities. Although one may understand the concept of a marginalised majority, there are minorities in need of recognition and gaining a voice that the majority of society is still not recognizing. Doesn’t that concept risk create problematic non-recognition?

Elke Krasny: These terms are not in contradiction with each other. When we talk about people being “marginalised”, they are not marginal in numbers. The “marginalised”, in economic and material terms, make up the majority of people inhabiting the planet.


Griselda Pollock: The radical challenge of feminist theory cannot be digested by the institutions and hence we arrive at this contradiction. I feel this process of silencing feminist theory constantly even all your speakers and myself included have put this eloquently into the world in many volumes, articles, exhibitions. This is a real war against all forms of radical theory and the practices such theory inspires.

Angela Dimitrakaki: Though there is today a need to depart from exhibitions of women artists, and these cannot be repeated forever, there is a certain historicity that demanded the construction of “women artists” as a political category. We should evaluate how the concepts of feminism, of gender, function “out there” in the world. There have been very sophisticated exhibitions that were not about putting women artists into history, but that showed a construction of a different temporality, chronology, or lineage of modernity.

Angela Dimitrakaki: In a time that is marked by climate destruction and nuclear threats, there is a finitude on the basis of which we act: Feminism is a project that surpasses our singular lifetimes, one that is of humanity and beyond. This is not in contrast with linear time, which is associated with a certain reading of modernity and the idea of progress. Transmission is a central mechanism in feminism and Gen Xers have a particular mediating historical position. We can talk about “generations” as people who live under similar threats at the same time.

Julia Morandeira: An important contribution by decolonial feminist thinkers is the notion that multiple temporalities coexist, though one has been hegemonically imposed.

Elke Krasny: While there has been much written about the social production of space, there is no book on the social, or the very anti-social, production of *time* and the way in which the enormous number of uncounted hours, the hours that do not count in terms of money, the care hours, make possible that there is time left – the time we call future. If we stop caring, then we are not contributing



to any kind of continuation. The right question to ask is how can we become beings that have time and resources to care so that we can become free to care, instead of being forced to care. If we no longer just assume that one gender is assigned the labour of care by birth then we can think differently about how making futures might take place. We do things to change the world, but we may not be here to actually benefit from them: we do this for others. We could start thinking, or even make an exhibition about the things people have been doing for those others that they don't even know because they are in the future. This is a very materialist concern. The things we do with beings and things in mind that we don't know go beyond the kinds of connections that only exist because we feel we are similar.

Summary written by Eleni Pantelaras for DCA, 2022
Coordination: Marie Chênél

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