

Re-Evaluations in Feminism and Contemporary Art

Volume 1

Edited by
Katy Deepwell

Series in Art



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Jana Kukaine's chapter 15, "It's Your Fault! Feminist Art, Foodwork and the Postsocialist Kitchen," was developed within the Postdoctoral Grant "Vegetal Agency and Contemporary Art: Towards Sustainable Relationships with a More-Than-Human World" (No. RSU-PG-2024/1-0003), part of the project "RSU Internal and RSU with LASE External Consolidation" (No. 5.2.1.1.i.0/2/24/1/CFLA/005), funded by the European Union Recovery and Resilience Facility and the budget of the Republic of Latvia, which supported its open access publication. This chapter is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, provided you give appropriate credit to the author, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Cover design by Katy Deepwell.

This collection reflects the pressing need to re-evaluate the ongoing developments of global feminism. The seventeen texts address a diversity of global histories and legacies, examining a range of approaches, from developing 'Aotherness' to challenge dominant limitations of representations, to intertwining feminist actions with visual activism – from Europe, the United States, and Latin America to China, Thailand and Ukraine. This diverse re-evaluation provides new perspectives on the significance of feminist art during the ongoing turbulent times.

Dr. Maria Photiou
Identity, Culture and Representation Research Centre
University of Derby

Katy Deepwell has the rare ability to catalyse and connect a Global feminist art community. The many contributors to Re-Evaluations in Feminism and Contemporary Art evidence the scope, diversity and political attunement of this field: they show us what can be done and what more there is to do.

Prof. Dr. Amy Tobin
University of Cambridge
Author of *Women Artists Together, Art in the Age of Women's Liberation*

The book is a wake-up call to stimulate feminist art history writing. It asserts that feminism must evolve in response to contemporary world transformations. It calls for a shift from identity-based concerns to issue-oriented approaches.

Katy Deepwell, the editor and a renowned feminist art historian, has long supported women writers and artists from different parts of the world. This is what gives her credibility and validates her manifesto.

All the conference lectures incorporated into the volume relate to the call and show how the principles are put into practice. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in 21st century feminist art history.

Dr. Edit András
Senior Research Member
ELTE, RCH, Institute of Art History, Budapest.
Winner of the Igor Zabel Prize for Culture and Theory 2024

Table of Contents

List of Figures	ix
Acknowledgements	xvii
Katy Deepwell	
Introduction:	
Why Re-Evaluation Now for Feminism and Contemporary Art?	xix
Katy Deepwell	
Section 1: Local/Global Feminisms and Histories	1
Chapter 1	
Macrohistories and Feminist Microhistories: Women Artists as Archivists of Solidarity and Intersectionality	3
Suzana Milevska	
Chapter 2	
Feminisms, Contemporary Art and World-Systems Theories	21
Katy Deepwell	
Chapter 3	
A Field of ‘Anotherness’	43
Maria Kheirkhah	
Chapter 4	
Imaginary Maps: Writing Feminist Solidarities Beyond the Centre	59
Kimberly Lamm	
Chapter 5	
Feminine-ism and Feminism: Two Approaches to Chinese Contemporary Feminist Art	75
Qingyu Shen	
Chapter 6	
Exercises in Post-Socialist Feminist Art History: Historicizing Collective Artistic Labour during Socialism	95
Karolina Majewska-Güde	

Section 2: Re-evaluations of Exhibitions	115
Chapter 7	
Performing Organizational Feminism: VALIE EXPORT and Silvia Eiblmayr's <i>Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn</i> (1985)	117
Lisa Moravec	
Chapter 8	
<i>Conceptual Clothing</i> (1986–1988): A New Category?	133
Fran Cottell	
Chapter 9	
Catchup and Affinity in Women's Exhibitions: Re-evaluating the Femaissance Links between <i>Global Feminisms</i> and <i>Another Energy</i>	151
Valeria Mari	
Chapter 10	
The Broken Genealogy of Feminist Art History: The Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League (1967–1980) in Socialist Poland	171
Wiktoria Szczupacka	
Chapter 11	
The Separatist Issue in the 1980s Italian Art System	187
Angela Maderna	
Chapter 12	
Words Weaving Worlds. Feminist and Queer Curating in Contemporary Art in 1990s Spain	203
Pedro Merchán Mateos	
Section 3: Histories of Conflicts, Situations and Countries	225
Chapter 13	
Woman's Body as a Site of Struggle and Land as a Struggling Body: Contemporary Ukrainian Women Artists	227
Oksana Briukhovetska	
Chapter 14	
The Collereuses and Social Protests in Feminist Art in Latin America after the 1990s	251
Gabriela Traple Wieczorek	

Chapter 15	
It's Your Fault! Feminist Art, Foodwork and the Postsocialist Kitchen	263
Jana Kukaine	
Chapter 16	
(Re)-Evaluating Artistic Norms and Temporalities: Feminist and Disability Perspectives in Contemporary Practice	285
Virginia Marano	
Chapter 17	
"The Spectacle is Vulnerable": On the Iconoclastic Origins of Feminist Art Theory	307
Alexandra Kokoli	
About the Authors	323
Index	331

List of Figures

- 1.1: Front cover of catalogue, *Capital and Gender: international project for art and theory*, 24–27 January 2001, Skopje, North Macedonia, curated by Suzana Milevska. Photo: courtesy of Suzana Milevska. 9
- 1.2: Danica Dakic and Sandra Sterle, *Go_HOME*, 2001, poster, on display in *Perfect Match, a public art project* at City Shopping Mall, Skopje, North Macedonia. Curated by Suzana Milevska. Photo: courtesy of Suzana Milevska and artists. 10
- 1.3: Tanja Ostojić: *Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić: Migration Map of 30 Tanjas Ostojić* (2013). Drawing in pencil on aquarelle paper, 254 x 138 cm. Installation view: Museum of Contemporary Art Belgrade Salon. Photo: Nikola Radić-Lucati. Copyright/courtesy: Tanja Ostojić. 15
- 1.4: *Embroidered Lexicon of Tanjas Ostojić* (2017). Embroidery on cotton. 200 x 160 cm. Coauthors: Jelena Dinić, Tanja Ostojić (Banja Luka), Tanja Ostojić (Berlin), Tanja Ostojić (Trn), Tanja Ostojić (Udine), Tanja Ostojić-Guteša, Tanja Ostojić-Petrović, Tanja Petar Ostojić, Tatjana Ostojić (Beograd), Tatjana Ostojić Alabama, Sunčica Šido and Vahida Ramujkić. Workshop facilitators: Tanja Ostojić (Berlin) and Vahida Ramujkić. Photo: Nikola Radić-Lucati. Copyright/courtesy: Tanja Ostojić. 16
- 2.1: Map of the world with density of colour indicating the number of articles published in *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* by artists, curators or writers living or working in each country. Map prepared by Katy Deepwell. Please note: this is not a measure of authors' ethnicity, race or nationality. 23
- 2.2: Cloudlist from <https://www.ktpress.co.uk> pages indicating the countries where articles published in *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* by artists, curators or writers living in each country. Please note: this is not a measure of authors' ethnicity, race or nationality. Courtesy of KT press, Katy Deepwell. 25
- 2.3: Cluster model of four different perspectives found in articles in *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal* (1998–2017)

- and identified through traits in the arguments raised.
Prepared by Katy Deepwell. 33
- 3.1: Maria Kheirkhah, *1001 Questions* (2009). Digital print. Staged photographic work from the ongoing Safie Series, an ongoing series of works that interrogates fear, fiction and the demonisation of Muslim bodies in Western narratives. 47
- 3.2: Maria Kheirkhah *Untitled*, photograph, (2024) incorporating a scene from *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, directed by Ana Lily Amirpour (Spectre Vision/Kino Lorber, 2014). Captured during a private viewing, 2024. Courtesy of artist. 52
- 4.1: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha: *Aveugle Voix*. (1975) Photographs of performance rehearsal at the Greek Theater; 1 of 10 black-and-white photographs; 9 1/2 x 6 3/4 in.; University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; Gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation. 64
- 4.2: Mona Hatoum: *Measures of Distance* (1988). Still of video. 15.35 min. A Western Front video production, Vancouver @ 2025. Mona Hatoum, Courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago. 65
- 5.1: Li Xinmo, *Jingxue de zihuaxiang* 经血的自画像 (*Self-portrait in Menstrual Blood*), 2009, blood on xuan paper. Courtesy of the artist. 83
- 5.2: Ling & Comma, *Nü Quan* 女泉 (*Women's Spring*), 2009, ceramic. Courtesy of the artists. 87
- 5.3: Zhou Wenjing, *Nüren xilie jieyuhuan* 女人系列·节育环 (*Women Series: IUDs*), 2014, mixed media. Courtesy of the artist. 90
- 6.1: Painter Leokadia Jaśkiewicz, at the Fajans Factory, 1975, Photo © Courtesy of the Faience Department, Museum of Kujawy and Dobrzyń Land (MZKiD) in Włocławek. 97
- 6.2: Wiola Ujazdowska, Objects from the series *Kobiety Fajasu* [Women of Fajans], 2024 (work in progress), Photo © Courtesy of the artist. 107
- 6.3: Wiola Ujazdowska, Painting from the series *Kobiety Fajasu* [Women of Fajans], 2020, Photo © Courtesy of the artist. 108
- 6.4: Wiola Ujazdowska, Painting from the series *Kobiety Fajasu* [Women of Fajans], 2020, Photo © Courtesy of the artist. 109

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- 6.5: Wiola Ujazdowska, Performance documentation from the series *Kobiety Fajasu* [Women of Fajans], 2023, Photo © Courtesy of the artist. 110
- 7.1: *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn*, colour exhibition poster, 84 x 59 cm, designed by Catherine Rollier, using a work by Helena Almeida/Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts, Wien, 1985. 118
- 7.2: Exterior photograph of the exhibition banner at 20. Jahrhundert, Wien, 1985. 120
- 7.3: Photographs of pages from the *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn* catalogue, edited by VALIE EXPORT and Silvia Eiblymayr, 1985. Catalogue edited by Silvia Eiblmayr, Valie Export, and Monika Prischl-Maier with Cathrin Pichler. Monika Prischl-Maier was from the museum and supported the organization. 123
- 7.4: Photographs of pages from the *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn* catalogue, edited by VALIE EXPORT and Silvia Eiblymayr, 1985. Catalogue edited by Silvia Eiblmayr, Valie Export, and Monika Prischl-Maier with Cathrin Pichler. 124
- 7.5: Photographs of pages from the *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn* catalogue, edited by VALIE EXPORT and Silvia Eiblymayr, 1985. Catalogue edited by Silvia Eiblmayr, Valie Export, and Monika Prischl-Maier with Cathrin Pichler. The catalogue included texts by Carolee Schneemann, Lucy R. Lippard and Maria Lassnig. 127
- 8.1: Marian Schoettle: *Adult's and Child's Plastered Jackets—please try it on*. 1986. 32 x 25 x 10. Wall insulation fabric and plaster+webbing label, shown in *Conceptual Clothing*. 135
- 8.2: Fran Cottell (left and hanging) *Insistence*, 1985 and (right) *Containment*, 1986, installation view. *Private Thoughts/Public Speaking* Battersea Arts Centre. 1986. Photo: Nick Powell. 136
- 8.3: *Conceptual Clothing* installation view, Preston Art Gallery. 138
- 8.4: Rose Garrard *La Pittura, the Spirit of Painting Reclaimed*, 1986. 139
- 8.5: Fran Cottell artist wearing *Wearable Print*. 1986. Photo: Nick Powell. 141
- 8.6: Fran Cottell *Containment*, 1986. 9 pieces: muslin, wire and dye. Battersea Arts Centre. Photo: Terry Watts. 144
- 8.7: Fran Cottell and Caroline Broadhead *Undercover* performance for *Conceptual Clothing US/UK*. 148

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- 8.8: Caroline Broadhead, installation view of works in *Conceptual ClothingUS/UK, 1989*. 148
- 9.1: Installation view of *Global Feminisms* at the Brooklyn Museum (March 2–July 1, 2007); photo by Christine Gant. Courtesy Brooklyn Museum. 162
- 9.2: *Another Energy's* exhibition gallery at the Mori Art Museum (April 22, 2021–January 16, 2022) with works by Carmen Herrera, Miyamoto Kazuko and Nunung WS. Detail from 3D Walkthrough by Matterport, <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=wyur93JE91S>. Courtesy Mori Art Museum. 165
- 9.3: *Another Energy's* exhibition gallery at the Mori Art Museum (April 22, 2021–January 16, 2022) with works by Miyamoto Kazuko and Nunung WS. Detail from 3D Walkthrough by Matterport, <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=wyur93JE91S>. Courtesy Mori Art Museum. 165
- 10.1: Opening of the CLANIK group exhibition, 1976, Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League, photographer unknown. Courtesy of Justyna Bacz-Kazior. Private archive of Justyna Bacz-Kazior. 176
- 10.2: 5 images of folders from Archiwum Ireny Huml-Bacz, Dept. of 20th & 21st-Century Visual Arts Documentation, Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw. Courtesy of Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences. 177
- 10.3: Krzysztof Zarębski, *Flowers* happening, 1971, The Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League, photo by Zygmunt Rytka, courtesy of the In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation. 179
- 10.4: Krzysztof Zarębski, *Flowers* happening, 1971, The Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League, photo by Zygmunt Rytka, courtesy of the In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation. 180
- 10.5: Krzysztof Zarębski, *Flowers* happening, 1971, The Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League, photo by Zygmunt Rytka, courtesy of the In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation. 180
- 10.6: Krzysztof Zarębski, *Flowers* happening, 1971, The Gallery of the District Board of the Women's League, photo by

Zygmunt Rytka, courtesy of the In Situ Contemporary Art Foundation.	181
11.1: Mariella Bettineschi, <i>Morbido</i> , 1980, organza, cotton wool, gold, 21x19 x3, courtesy of the artist.	193
11.2: Paola Gandolfi, <i>Salomè</i> , 1989, oil on canvas, 140x120 cm, private collection, courtesy of the artist.	194
11.3: Clara Bonfiglio, <i>Sagome nere</i> , 1984, 100x200 cm, multilayer material and paints, courtesy of the artist.	197
13.1: Maria Kulikovska. <i>Let Me Say: It is not Forgotten</i> , video performance, 2019, Kyiv. Courtesy of the artist.	230
13.2: Oksana Chepelyk. <i>The Fortinbras Chronicles</i> , video-work, 2001. Videostill.	232
13.3: Vlada Ralko. From <i>Kyiv Diary</i> series, 2015–2023, 29.7 x 21 cm, watercolour, ballpoint pen on paper.	233
13.4: Vlada Ralko. <i>Longing for the Motherland</i> , painting, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 600 cm, 2015.	234
13.5: Ksenia Hnylytska. <i>While Masters Have Fun in Kyiv, Serfs Damp the Land With Their Blood</i> , painting, printed calendar, 2015.	238
13.6: Dana Kavelina. Banner for the 8 March feminist demonstration, Kyiv, 2018.	239
13.7: Dana Kavelina. Banner for the 8 March feminist demonstration, Kyiv, 2019.	240
13.8: Marharyta Polovinko, <i>Sleep in the Grove</i> , blood and pencil on paper, 2022. Photo by Viktor Pavlenko. Courtesy of the Marharyta Polovinko Estate.	243
13.9: Kateryna Aliinyk. <i>Tomb Sticks</i> , acrylic on canvas, 2023.	244
13.10: Kateryna Lysovenko. <i>Bodies of Houses</i> , watercolour, paper, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.	246
13.11: Kateryna Lysovenko. <i>Land is Ready to Become a Mother</i> , oil, canvas, 2024. Courtesy of the artist.	247
13.12: Kateryna Buchatska. <i>Crater in Moshchun, Ukraine</i> , photography, May 2022. Courtesy of the artist.	248
15.1: Aija Jurjāne. <i>Untitled</i> . 2008. Courtesy of the family.	270
15.2: Aija Jurjāne. <i>Untitled</i> . 2012. Courtesy of the family.	271
15.3: Aija Jurjāne. 1988. <i>Pot Scrubbing</i> . Collection of gallery <i>Jēkabs</i> .	272

- 15.4: Aija Jurjāne. 2012. *Stove and Pantry Door with Caravaggio Calendar*. Watercolour on paper. Courtesy of the family. 274
- 15.5: Aija Jurjāne. *Domestic Life with a Workingday Cake*. 1987. Collection of the Artists' Union of Latvia. 276
- 15.6: Rasa Jansone. *Diet*. A jar with a label in Latvian *Pati vainīga! (It's your fault!)* 2017. Photo by Valdis Jansons. 277
- 15.7: The process of creation. The kitchen of "Dūmiņi" farm, Bauska district, Latvia. 2016. Photo by Rasa Jansone. 278
- 15.8: Rasa Jansone. Installation *Diet* at *Tartu Art House, Estonia*. Photo by Valdis Jansons. 279
- 15.9: Rasa Jansone. *Diet*. A jar with a label in Latvian *Pati vainīga! (It's your fault!)* 2017. Photo by Valdis Jansons. 280
- 16.1: Screenshot from Finnegan Shannon and Bojana Coklyat *Alt Text as Poetry*, a project exploring alt text as a creative practice. 290
- 16.2: Finnegan Shannon, *Do you want us here or not*, MDO, paint, 2018–ongoing. Courtesy of Finnegan Shannon. 291
- 16.3: Carolyn Lazard, *Support System (for Park, Tina and Bob)*, 2016, 24 gifted bouquets, documentation of performance and collectively produced sculpture, dimensions variable. Courtesy of Carolyn Lazard. 293
- 16.4: WeMend prep session meet in Bangkok to sew pieces received from all locations. Bangkok, 2024. Photo courtesy Womanifesto archive. 296
- 16.5: Womanifesto WeMend at AWID International Forum, Bangkok 2024. Photo: Varsha Nair. 298
- 16.6: Womanifesto WeMend at AWID International Forum, Bangkok 2024. Photo: Varsha Nair. 299
- 16.7: January 2019 performance of Black Power Naps at Performance Space New York. Photo by Avi Avion. Courtesy Black Power Naps. 301
- 17.1: Malek Namlaghi, *Miss World, 1978/2025 (2025)*. Mixed media installation, Middlesex University Fine Art degree show 2025, Hendon campus, London. Reproduced with permission from the artist; photos by Alexandra Kokoli. 319

- 17.2: Malek Namlaghi, *Miss World, 1978/2025* (2025). Mixed media installation, Middlesex University Fine Art degree show 2025, Hendon campus, London. Reproduced with permission from the artist; photos by Alexandra Kokoli. 320

Acknowledgements

Katy Deepwell

The two volumes, *Re-Evaluation in Feminism and Contemporary Art*, arose from a conference organised in September 2024 under the umbrella of the Create/Feminisms research cluster at Middlesex University. This was the last in a series of major conferences since the group came together in 2013; and two previous events have resulted in major anthologies which I also initiated and edited: Katy Deepwell (ed) *De-/Anti-/Post-colonial Feminisms in Contemporary Art and Textile Crafts* (KT press, 2023) and Katy Deepwell (ed) *Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms* (Valiz, 2020). One of the strongest features of Create/Feminisms events has been the group's creative determination to bring together a wide range of women artists, art historians, critics and curators—as well as women from many different local/global dynamics—valuing and appreciating their willingness to join the feminist conversations and dialogues. These two volumes extend this work, even though it will be the last publication from Create/Feminisms due to changes in the employment and research management of the University, which have dissolved this successful research cluster after 11 years. My thanks go to my co-organisers, Alexandra Kokoli and Elli Young, as well as all the previous colleagues at MDX who have helped make these events possible, 2013–2024 and the University for dedicating research funding for these events in previous years.

When we sent out the call for papers for the hybrid conference on “Re-Evaluation in Feminism and Contemporary Art”, we received over 80 proposals for papers—a signal of the interest in this topic—but we were able to programme only 36 speakers in 6 simultaneous panels on the day. Our two keynote speakers were Oksana Briukhovetska (see this volume) and Ghazel (see volume 2). As a result of this interest, we offered opportunities for people whose papers were not accepted to present physical posters on their research topic or artworks and 14 agreed to do so, and these were printed and displayed on the day. We also worked with Middlesex Library to mount a special display of artists' books by women and feminist magazines from their unique collection for the 100+ attendees who came in person. A further 150 people joined online during the day. My thanks go to everyone who attended (online or in person) on the day. The interest in the conference has led to all those who agreed to participate here in rewriting and reworking their contributions and I want to thank the contributors for their hard work.

Introduction:

Why Re-Evaluation Now for Feminism and Contemporary Art?

Katy Deepwell

Why might re-evaluation be a timely theme for feminist research and enquiry now? In one sense, all new research starts from a re-evaluation of existing work and in these two volumes by 34 artists, art historians, curators and critics from many countries, this straightforward idea of re-evaluation is present. However, below I will attempt to summarise and suggest how re-evaluation in feminism is developed in other ways, building on extensive and different legacies in feminist theory and research and a doubled movement of looking back to think forward.¹

Women artists: Where, When, How, Why and in What Form?

Feminist approaches to art history and the arts start with an important and deceptively simple question from women's studies: "What is the contribution of women artists and of women to the arts?" Since the early 1970s, people in many countries (including those beyond the Euro-American mainstream) have attempted to describe, position, show, reproduce, explain and assess the work of women artists in relation to many forms of art practice, art movements and diverse periods in history, through a wide variety of different publications and exhibitions.² This question has prompted massive searches by art historians, curators and artists through public and private archives, collections, museum basements and libraries, to find, re-establish and document women artists' lives and works, as well as producing oral histories through interviews with many artists, curators and collectors. This work has also led to dictionaries and databases, new archives and online websites, surveys, different kinds of exhibitions, retrospectives and catalogue raisonnés on women artists. Amongst women artists, this work also prompted the founding of research collectives and new artworks reflecting on earlier artworks by women, as well as the

¹ This was also the theme of Griselda Pollock's final conference in Leeds University in 2018 to celebrate her 40 years as Professor there.

² See the resources of The Feminist Art Observatory at <https://www.ktpress.co.uk> where over 300 anthologies are listed from around the world, plus websites, exhibitions, theses, manifestos and databases on feminism and contemporary art.

building of specific archives, libraries and art collections where works by women artists became the focus.³ This approach to looking back into history and reviewing previous historical accounts was more than a consideration of dates, facts, oeuvres, biographies and autobiographies. Feminists “moved forward” by debating the many differences between women as artists (from both their male and female peers, as well as between generations and geographies) and their problematic relation to male-defined and dominated movements in modernism/post-modernism, avant-gardes, academies and traditions, as inventors and innovators.

This hunger for knowledge—and with it the recognition that other viewpoints on the status quo were possible—was to overcome the lack of any information about women artists found in existing textbooks and taught courses for many generations and the literal absence of women artists’ works from the walls of museums and galleries around the globe. While an impressive body of research about women artists now exists in many countries around the world (often as an addition to local, ethnic and national histories), knowledge about previous generations of women artists in other parts of the world remains unwritten, fragmented or not available. Placing women artists at the centre of research offered a means to reframe how art history and art criticism itself could be written and a starting point for how different models for curating and producing art practice could be generated, but its development across the world has been uneven. Examining the relationship between women as artists and their position as women in society was not about substituting a new canon of ‘old mistresses’ to match “old masters” in the museum or history textbook, nor simply about identifying or naming where each artwork or artist’s life, as case studies, presented a reinforcement or challenge to normative heterosexuality, with idealised or stereotypical models at either end of a spectrum for femininity and/or masculinity. Feminist research did not limit its research to forgotten and marginalised subjects, but engaged in many other social, cultural and political agendas for change.

While a few women artists have received a certain level of hypervisibility, the relative visibility of many others and the utter invisibility of the majority, beyond distinctions across developed/developing worlds or Global South compared to a Global North, remains an issue. The attention to some artists in these debates locally, nationally or internationally currently is heavily dependent on where,

³ There is now an international network of women’s museums, as well as specific collections of women artists’ works, including the National Museum of Women in Washington, USA; the Frauen Museum in Bonn, the Sammlung Verbund Collection in Austria; the Edward Murray College Women’s Art Collection in Cambridge, UK and many other private collections. Feminist art archives and libraries have been very diverse, from Bildwechsel (Hamburg) to Women’s Art Library (London) and V.B.K.O. (Vienna).

how and if knowledge developed in one language or one place travels elsewhere in the world, via translation, publications and exhibition and along which routes. There remains a tension in feminist art history between drawing on what is already published and artists and artworks that are known (whose work may benefit from re-evaluation) and artists or artworks where little or nothing has ever been published (and re-evaluation signals recovery). Gender is one part of this equation alongside race, class, ethnicity, wealth/ access to resources, amongst many other distinctions that can be made about human beings and the art they produce. The current Euro/American-centrism in published feminist research and exhibitions remains a reflection of the range of exhibitions in the mainstream of the art world, which, in spite of attempts to reframe a “global contemporary” in art, represent generally less than half the countries around the globe. The expansion of national representation within international exhibitions and biennales since the late 1970s has provided many artists with unprecedented visibility in these forums. It has also given rise to fractious debates about how or whether their artworks represent local, national or international tendencies, offer in-depth critiques of nationalism/ nationhood and/or coloniality or are naively underpinned by assumptions about their identity as artists as a form of diversity politics, in claims for their authenticity as hybrid, indigenous or decolonial voices, when pitched against a mainstream cosmopolitanism. International forums and biennales have contributed significantly to how contemporary art practices are shared, embraced or rejected in other places and drawn attention to contemporary women’s art practices as a central part of the international art world today and no longer on its margins. The tremendous growth in exhibitions and publications on feminism and contemporary art since the 1990s, especially as the art world expanded the scope of its internationalism and the idea of a “global contemporary” emerged, has also changed models of international co-operation between feminist art historians, artists, curators and critics, increasing exchanges and sharing of viewpoints and differences beyond bi-national models. This is why these volumes could bring together such a diverse range of scholars, artists, curators and critics from different countries and fields of research to discuss feminism in contemporary art. These transnational investigations into distinct, often local scenes and situations, in their explorations of women’s interventions, are contributions to a larger shared collective project amongst many artists, curators, critics and writers internationally in feminist research. In these volumes, their diverse viewpoints represent some of the key transnational and transgenerational dimensions of feminist research today.

Feminist art history and art criticism have followed many other lines of enquiry, since it began in the 1970s, including critiquing how artists’ biographies are written, the relations between genre and gender and the diversity of representations of gendered bodies (both masculine and feminine) in relation to sex, sexuality and subjectivities in art. Feminism(s)’ contribution, as Janet

Wolff suggests, has always been a double movement, both to interrogate existing histories while providing significant corrections to what constitutes “history” and “Art”.⁴ Re-evaluation here means re-evaluating the hierarchies around which knowledge has been built, and this now includes the multiple ways in which feminist work itself has been mis/understood. Clare Hemmings has analysed the gloss/assumptions/repetitions in articles from feminist cultural and political journals in *Why Stories Matter*,⁵ and she identified how feminist claims for re-evaluation were invested in topics and citations calling for 1) progress in relation to a past, 2) calls for a return to origins or core principles or 3) attempts to reclaim older feminisms as a means to move forward. The tensions between these three approaches to re-evaluation as different ways of looking backward and thinking forward are evident in these volumes.

Inclusion versus Discrimination

While the art world engages and regularly markets exhibitions of women artists as “rediscovering” them, even when they have had long exhibiting careers, taught for decades, or played a fundamental part in organising groups, it is still necessary to ask what changes feminisms (as politics, practices and theories) have brought to our understanding of art practices, art criticism and art history? Has feminist scholarship changed museums’ curatorial practices, critical writing and art history or are similar models, with regional variants, simply being reproduced in different locations with different subjects? This is not a question of being for/against one version of a recognisable form of feminist scholarship as “inclusion”; it is a question about how agendas and ideas from multiple feminisms (as practices and theories) have changed discussions and debates about women artists and their works in many directions. The echoes and reverberations of the long debate about sex/gender distinctions and about essentialist/anti-essentialist strategies, started in the 1980s, continue to arise in discussions around naming, producing or recognising gendered, queer as well as homosexual/heterosexual identities in the 2020s, but many questions raised by decades of feminist theory remain to be addressed.

Why the neglect of women’s work occurred as part of systemic discrimination in relation to both gender and genre, and different nations’ art histories remain

⁴ Martina Pachmanova, Interview with Janet Wolff. In: Martina Pachmanova. *Mobile fidelities: conversations on feminism, history and visibility*. *n.paradoxa* online issue 19, (May 2006). (London: KT press). Available in: https://www.ktpress.co.uk/pdf/nparadox_aissue19_Martina-Pachmanova_86-97.pdf. Accessed in January 2023.

⁵ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* Duke University Press, 2011. Katy Deepwell 'Why Feminist Stories Matter: Katy Deepwell interviews Clare Hemmings' 40 (July 2017) *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*: 60-68.

unanswered. Similarly, how differentiation of Art from craft was built alongside critical bias and selection procedures against women artists' works in museum practices and exhibitions (and whether this is still reproduced) is repeatedly raised but never answered. Most importantly, questions remain about who holds power in the art world as gatekeepers to maintain and reproduce discrimination from which many women artists have suffered. The criticism that knowledge production remains skewed towards masculine agendas and concerns remains. Systemic forms of discrimination also operate through specific agendas in research and its funding; stereotypes across race/class/sex and sexual preference persist; and the category of Art remains so routinely reserved for men that women are automatically placed in a negative relation to it and have to challenge links to or associations with traditional craft practices, amateurism or Nature. Sexism within the culture as a whole, evident in sexual harassment, violence against women and predatory male behaviour in education and the workplace, were and are signs of discrimination (negative judgement) about what women do, produce or say. These were issues raised not just in the 1970s, but in every decade since, even though women's position and status in society has changed dramatically in the last sixty years and as the language and legal frameworks around what constitutes discrimination on the grounds of sex have changed in many countries, not least through the UN's policy interventions. Raising feminist questions about women's issues and women's cultural production has lost none of its force to shock or disrupt the status quo, and it often requires considerable courage to speak out. Hostile agendas which continue to frame feminism negatively and deny it a voice criticise feminism as only about "gender politics" (meaning this is irrelevant to men and women?) or suggest that any critiques of "whiteness" in feminism in the 1970s or in the present (means anything from feminism is always somehow racist?) or castigate feminism for its failure to attend to "trans-rights" (as a discrimination which somehow only feminists enact?) when these problems are endemic to an unequal world dominated by Euro/American-centrism, colonial legacies and capitalist, homophobic and misogynist mentalities and behaviours. Contrary to these repeated denunciations, feminism has a long history of tackling questions about racism, ethnocentrism, nationalism, homo- and trans-phobia, while drawing attention to the reproduction of existing gender orders, as these essays demonstrate. While gender (as the division between men/women) remains a complex category of analysis in sociology/politics/economics, when it comes to discussions of the major concentrations of women's labour in the world today—in health, education and administration (i.e. the dominant presence of women as mothers/carers, cooks, cleaners, agricultural workers, sex workers and modern slaves), their participation and opposition to war (as civilians and military), or their different and diverse migration patterns when compared to men globally—the struggle to name these forms of resistance and activism

by/with/on behalf of women (even in co-operation with other groups) still fall under this umbrella term, feminism! Perhaps re-evaluation seems necessary because of how political agendas have been transformed in so many directions and the languages used—including feminisms—that holding on to a single word to describe so many diverse actions, practices and events by half of humanity may no longer “fit”, but then qualifying it with an additional adjective (queer, decolonial, black, lesbian, trans-) doesn't appear to revolutionise it either.

Feminist research aimed for a total re-evaluation of the hierarchies, concepts and categories through which Art was understood, including the local/national/international and transnational as their location and positionality. To address how different modes of enquiry beyond “inserting women into national histories” are linked to broader trends in local/national, trans-national and international histories, especially with regard to colonial/post-colonial analyses, or to how changes in feminist theory of visual culture/art theory or art histories have informed these changes requires re-evaluation of terms, concepts and categories. National identifications, often as a historical/theoretical location from which specific viewpoints emerge, continue to be redeployed even within feminist internationalisms, post-colonial theory, conceptions of the global contemporary or written against the dominant institutional narratives of national and sometimes nationalist, histories. With so many of these interventions now available in declaredly feminist accounts, are there common threads or methods deployed, or does everything rest on simply an understanding of discreet and irrevocably “different” kinds of stories from specific locations? The positionality of the researcher is often announced in the essays here and the location, even standpoint, of their arguments—including the affective, emotional reactions they describe—openly indicate their stance in relation to what they are researching. Whether women and/or feminism are the subjects of enquiry and what other aesthetic/social/political frameworks are employed in their interpretation are closely aligned to where personal identifications matter and which identitarian/identification strategies or questions in/against assumptions about identity politics are pursued.

Women's Time: Geopolitical Pasts and Presents

How women's or feminist time—in waves, by generation, as a long/short tradition or in cycles of works/co-operations/developments—is conceived is another point of re-evaluation in these volumes. Feminist scholarship in art history since the 1980s has settled on contrasting the early 1970s (as a point of origin) with its contemporary moment, an origin story typically placed in the

USA and seen as exported to the Rest of the World in subsequent decades.⁶ Linking back every new development in every decade since the 1970s to post-1968 second-wave cultural feminism has been a research emphasis maintained by many publications and exhibitions in many countries, even though (slightly contradictorily) second-wave feminism was heavily invested in a 'break with the past' in order to re-establish a new kind of cultural politics. The simultaneous and uneven development of feminism globally since the 1970s, (especially given the actions of the UN), however, now requires much more explanation and international comparisons,⁷ as feminism(s) have emerged in many different countries since then, which offer quite different approaches to those proposed in the USA. This is the reason why many of the contributions here focus on questioning feminist interventions in different decades and in other locations. In those parts of the world where feminisms in contemporary art emerge only prominently much later in the 1980s, 1990s, or even 2000s, does this reference to post-1968 only as an origin for feminism maintain a barrier between an avant-garde West and a retrograde Rest? Would horizontal approaches to simultaneity and contradiction across different geographies help to break these already well-established timelines? A reconceptualization of this model across time and within geopolitics is needed, given the importance of diverse and ongoing democratic struggles for liberty, equality and fraternity over two centuries in which feminism has been present (and more recently against the far right, a return of Fascism and anti-feminist forms of neoliberalism). Women's/woman movements and early manifestations of proto-feminist activities in prominent women's lives are now well-documented in many developed and developing countries, closely linked to women's resistance to different forms of military occupation, fascism, dictatorships, imperialism or colonialism. Exchanges between feminisms are not uni-directional from the West to the Rest, nor is the path a simple line of historical progress from one era or regime to another. What might be the effects of contrasting other moments in the past sixty years and looking at other starting points than 1968 or ruptures in feminist debate – for example, contrasting moments like 2007 when there was a seeming explosion of feminist art exhibitions in America and Europe or 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down or 1977 when the first international exhibitions of feminism started to emerge in Europe? Perhaps there are other 'origin' stories through which

⁶ The international impact of Norma Broude and Mary Garrard's work in art history and their book, *The Power of Feminist Art* (Abrams, 1995) or, 20 years earlier, Lucy Lippard's *Through the Centre: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (E.P.Dutton, 1975) alongside the publication of Judy Chicago's *Through the Flower* (Doubleday, 1975) are all seen as the representative basis for this, even though they summarise local situations in the USA.

⁷ Agata Jakubowska and K. Deepwell (eds), *All-Women Spaces in the Long 1970s in Europe* (Liverpool Univ Press, 2018).

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Index

A

A Space of One's Own (2018), 241, 249
Abakanowicz, Magdalena, 99
Abramović, Marina, 11
Absalon, Hilde, 126
Abu-Lughod, Lila, 46, 47, 49, 50, 55, 56
Accame, Vincenzo, 196
Accardi, Carla, 191, 192, 194, 198, 201
Acocella, Alessandra, 197
Acosta, Navild and Fannie Sosa, 285, 287, 300, 302
Addressing the Century (1998), 133, 143, 149
Adnan, Etel, 160
Ahmed, Leila, 47, 48, 56
Akerman, Chantal, 264
Albarracín, Pilar, 212, 213
Alexander, Sally, 313, 316, 317, 322
Aliinyk, Kateryna, 227, 244, 245, 249
Alloula, Malek, 45, 47, 56
Altmann, Susanne, 103
American Alliance of Museums, 153, 154, 168
American Art Today (1993), 140
Amini, Jina Mahsa Amini, 50
Amirpour, Ana Lily, xxxi, 43, 52, 53, 54, 56
Andrioulo, Angelo, 159
Another Energy (2021-2022), xxxii, 151-152, 156, 158-161, 164-170
Araeen, Rasheed, 49, 56, 136, 139
Arakistain, Xabier, 214, 217, 220
Arde, Tucumán, 259

Armstrong, Carol, 157, 168
Arton Foundation in Warsaw, 99
arttextiles (2000, 2002, 2004), 145, 146, 147, 149
Atwood, Margaret, 281
Auregli, Dede, 198
Avanessian, Armen, 111

B

Baigall, Matthew and Renee Baigall, 268
Bailey, Bridget, 46, 57, 136
Bailey, David A. and Gilane Tawadros, 46, 57
Bajević, Maja, 11
Bajoghli, Narges, 51, 56
Bal, Mieke, 32, 40
Balaghi, S., 48, 50, 56
Bandziak-Kwiatkowska, Karolina, 105
Barlow, Phyllida, 159
Barlow, Tani E., 77, 91, 92
Barnett, Pennina, 140, 145, 150
Barrancos, Dora, 261
Bauer, Ute Meta, 219
Bean, Anne, 124
Becker, Howard, 30, 128, 132, 159, 160, 168
Bednarek, Joanna, 101, 102, 112
Belbel, María José, 208, 212, 213, 216, 219, 220, 221
Belorusetz, Yevgenia, 234, 237
Belting, Hans, 23, 34, 40
Bender, Gretchen, 124
Benlloch, Miguel, 204, 218, 220
Bennholdt-Thomsen, Veronika, 26, 37, 41

Bentivoglio, Mirella, 198
 Berger, John, 44, 56
 Bertlmann, Renate, 126
 Bettineschi, Mariella, 187, 192, 193, 200
 Beynon, Kate, 157
 Biennale Donna, 187, 198-200
 Bildwechsel (Hamburg), xx
 Bilge, Sirma, 32, 40
 Bindy, Friedl, 126
 Binga, Tomaso, 198
 Bishop, Claire, 256, 262
Black Power Naps, 285, 287, 300-303
Black Rainbow, 236
 Blake, Nayland, 218
 Blanchard, Lara C. W., 86, 91
 Bless, Notburga Corona, 124
 Boghiguan, Anna, 160
 Bohachevsky-Chomiak, Marta, 231
 Bolt, Barbara, 106, 112
 Bonfiglio, Clara, 187, 192, 197, 200
 Bonito Oliva, Achille, 200
 Boniver, Margherita, 189
 Borden, Lizzie, 123
 Borja-Villel, Manuel, 206, 220
 Bortolon, Liana, 196
 Bossi, Lorena, 258
 Boyce, Sonia, 48
 Bradley, Fiona, 143
 Brennpunkt, 122
 Briukhovetska, Oksana, xvii, xxxii, 227-250, 323
 Broadhead, Caroline, 136, 137, 148
 Brooker, Sarah, 136
 Brooklyn Museum, xxxii, 67, 151, 152, 156, 157, 161, 162, 168
 Broude, Norma and Mary Garrard, xxv, xxxiii
 Brown, Mark, 161
 Brown, Wendy, 31
 Buchatska, Katya, 227, 244, 247, 248

Buchholz, Larissa, 30, 40
 Bul, Lee, 158, 161, 163, 164, 169, 170
 Bulajic, Vesna Viktorija, 123
 Butler, Cornelia H., 69, 72, 130, 131, 156, 166, 168
 Butler, Judith, xxx, 218, 288, 292
 Bychenkova, Uliana, 237, 241

C

Cabello/Carceller, 214, 216-218, 221
 Cahn, Miriam, 159
 Calabrò, Anna R. and Laura Grasso, 189, 202
 Calenda, Tay, 256
 Campani, Giovanna, 188
 Cantalupo, Patrizia, 187, 192, 198, 200, 201
Capital and Gender (Skopje, 2001), 8-12, 20, 327
 Caramés Sales, Ánxela, 214, 217, 221
 Carbonell, Mercedes, 212
 Carby, Hazel, 62, 72
 Carrasco, Nuria, 212
 Carrizo, Fernanda, 258
 Carroll, Noel, 30
Carta x carta (1988), 200
 Catania, Lucilla, 187, 190, 192, 193, 202
 Cerwonka, Allaine, 32, 40
 Cha, Theresa Hak Kyung, xxxi, 59-74
 Chadwick, Whitney, 48
 Chattopadhyay, Paresh, 129, 131
 Chechushkova, Dasha, 244
 Chepelyk, Oksana, 227, 232, 250
 Chiappe, Gaby and Rebecca Frayn, 315
 Chiarini, Doriana, 187, 192, 198

Chicago, Judy, xxv, xxxiii, 23, 42,
65, 76, 92, 125, 156, 215, 315,
322
Chierici, Vittoria, 187, 192
Chojnacka, Maria, 175
Cixous, Hélène, 7, 19
Clark, Lygia, 70
Coklyat, Bojana, 287, 289, 290, 304
Colaizzi, Giulia, 213, 219
Collereuses, 251-255
Conceptual Clothing (1986-1988),
xxxii, 133-150, 323
Conceptual Clothing Revisited,
133, 140, 142, 145, 147, 149, 323
Conceptual Clothing US/UK, 134,
137, 148
Coop Himmelb(l)eau, 148
Cordero, Karen, 255
Cottell, Fran, xxxii, 133-150, 323
Coulson, Amanda, 163, 168
Craig, Kate, 123, 215
Craxi, Bettino, 189
Creed, Barbara, 53, 56
Crimp, Douglas, 215, 221
Cuddihy, Mikey, 136, 139
Cuenca, Alberto López, 204, 206,
222
Cui, Shuqin, 76, 78, 92

D

Dabashi, Hamid, 48, 51, 56
Dadamaino, 199
Dadi, Iftikhar, 49, 56
Dakic, Danica and Sandra Sterle,
10
Danylevska, Yuliia, 244
Datuin, Flaudette May V., 298,
299, 304
Davis, Angela, 260
Davis, Lennard J., 290, 305
de Diego, Estrella, 210, 213, 215,
216
de Lauretis, Teresa, 215, 220

De Lorenzo, Daniela, 187, 192, 201
Debord, Guy, 51, 57
Deepwell, Katy, xix-xxxiv, 12, 21-
42, 125, 131, 133, 135, 214, 324
Delmar, Rosalind, 60, 61, 72
Dempster, Elisabeth, 215
Desenmascaremos el 92, 206
Dickens, Charles, 281
Dimitrakaki, Angela, 102, 111, 112
Diotima, 190
Discursive Dress (1993), 140
Dobrowolska, Anna, 182, 185
Dohnal, Johanna, 122
Donnell, Alison, 46, 57
Donohue, Lile Otaki, 159, 168
Doria, Anna Rossi, 190, 191, 202
Douglas Camp, Sokari, 136
Drees, Danielle, 302, 305
Dreisinger, Olivia, 289
Dress Codes (2009), 140
Dress Matters (2018), 140
Dujourie, Lili, 159
DUNA – Unione Nazionale Donne
Artiste, 187, 199, 200
Dynys, Chiara, 187, 192

E

Eiblmayr, Silvia, xxxii, 117-125,
127, 131, 132
Eisenstein, Zillah, 160, 169
El Rostro Velado (1997), 217
Elizabeth A. Sackler Center, 156,
157, 168
elles@centrepompidou (2009-
2011), 155
English, Rose, 119, 124, 132, 328
Eriksson, Lena, 296, 299
Erreakzioa/reacción, 219
Estación de tránsito (1995), 217
Evans, Harriet, 77, 92, 281
EXPORT, VALIE, 117-132

F

Fabijanska, Monika, 228
 Fajans, 95-98, 102, 104-105, 107-110
Fall from Fashion (1993), 140
 Fanon, Frantz, 45, 57
 Federici, Sylvia, 25
 Fedi, Fernanda, 187, 195-197, 200
 Feldman, Julia Pelta, 293, 305, 321
 Fell, Alison, 314
 FEMEN, 234, 235, 236, 241, 249, 253
feminaissance, xxxii, 151, 152, 156, 167, 169
 Feminist Ofenzyva, 236, 237, 249
 Feminist Workshop, 236, 249
Feministo (1975-1977), 264
 Fernández, Olga, 210, 217, 222
 Ferrer, Esther, 212
 Fidelis, Malgorzata, 101, 171, 172, 173, 185
 Finch, Sue, 312, 313, 316, 318, 321
 Fineman, Martha Albertson, 288, 305
 Fingerhut, Alicia, 212
 Finn-Kelcey, Rose, 121, 123, 132
 Fitzpatrick, Sheila, 173, 185
 Flowers, Bianca, 154, 169
Former West (2008-2016), 24, 41
 Fortune, Jenny, 312, 314, 321
 Fotouhi, Sanaz, 45, 57
 Foucault, Michel, 61, 72, 220
 Franco, Yolanda, 211, 220, 222
 Franklin, M. I., 321
 Fraser, Nancy, 27, 28, 41
 Freeman, Susie, 136
 Frenkel, Vera, 123
 Frente Amplio Mujeres que Luchan, 255
 Freund, Madeleine, 123, 132

G

Gaffney, Sheila, 133, 142
 Gago, Verónica, 261, 262
 Galindo, María, 257
 Gandolfi, Paola, 187, 192, 194, 195, 200
 Gao, Minglu, 81, 82, 86, 92, 94
 Garbayo Maeztu, Maite, 222
 Garcia-Rojas, Claudia, 5, 6, 19
 Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie, 285-289, 305
 Garrard, Rose, xxv, xxxiii, 123, 136, 138, 139
 Gaskell, Anna, 161-163, 169
 Geiger, Anna Bella, 159, 160, 169
 Germann, Martin, 151, 152, 159
 Gérôme, Jean-Léon, 46
 Gerovitch, Slava, 265, 282
 Ghazel, xvii
 Gianetti, Claudia, 219
 Gil, Victoria, 212, 213
 Giunta, Andrea, 99, 100
 Gjuzelova, Liljana, 3, 6-8, 19, 20
Global Feminisms (2007), xxxi, xxxii, 1, 67, 68, 72, 151-170
 Glushchenko, Irina, 265, 267, 282
 Goldstein, Darra, 267, 282
 González, Beatriz, 159
 González, Felipe, 204
 Gonzalez, Lélia, 260
Good Girls (2013), 156
 Gorsen, Peter, 124, 125, 132
 Gotby, Alva, 275, 282
 Grabowska, Agnieszka, 101
 Grabowska, Magdalena, 101, 171, 172, 173
 Grant, Jane, 312, 318, 321
 Grau, Eulàlia, 212
 Greene, Gayle and Coppélia Kahn, 215
 Grewal, Inderpal, 49, 53
 Groiss, Beatrix, 124
 Groskop, Viv, 152, 169

Guerresi, Mimouna, 187, 192, 195
 Guerrilla Girls, 219, 221
 Guzmán, Adriana, 256, 257, 260,
 262

H

Halbwachs, Maurice, 252, 262
 Halprin, Anna, 125
 Hammer, Barbara, 53, 123
 Hammond, Harmony, 220
 Hamraie, Aimi, 294, 305
 Haraway, Donna, xxviii, xxx, xxxiii,
 26, 41, 163, 164, 167, 169, 218,
 220
 Harding, Sandra, xxviii, xxxiii, 27,
 32, 41
 Harris, Jonathan, 308, 309
 Hassler, Katrin, 30, 32, 41
 Hatoum, Mona, xxxi, 39, 50, 59-74,
 136
 Haug, Frigga, 128, 132
 He Liu, Lydia, 78
 Helguera, Pablo, 252, 256, 262
 Hemmings, Clare, xxii, xxxiii, 41,
 60, 72
 Herman, Emma Harjadi, 154
 Hernández Velázquez, Yaiza, 207,
 222
 Heron, Susanna, 136
 Herrera, Carmen, 159, 160, 164,
 165, 168
 Hersey, Tricia, 303, 305
 Hertel, Joanna, 179
 Hiller, Susan, 136, 146, 147, 324
 Himid, Lubaina, 48
 Hleba, Halyna, 230, 232, 250
 Hnylytska, Ksenia, 227, 234, 238
 Ho, Elaine W., 87, 88
 Hock, Beata, 101
 Hohmeyer, Jürgen, 121, 132
 Holert, Tom, 109, 112
 Holmes, Cas, 136, 138
 Hong Xu, 80

hooks, bell, 62, 72, 302, 303, 305
 Horn, Rebecca, 70, 125, 126
 Hosten, Jennifer, 315-321
 Huml, Irene, 171-178, 183-184
100% (1993), 203, 209-216

I

I have a crisis for you (2022-2023),
 228
 Iakovlenko, Kateryna, 228, 230,
 232, 241, 244, 250
 Iannone, Dorothy, 125, 126
IF NOT NOW WHEN? (2022), 142
 INSIGHT (Kyiv), 236
 Invisible Battalion project, 238
 Irigaray, Luce, 130, 131, 132, 277
 Ivanova, Lucy, 244
 Ivchenko, Anna, 244
 Iveković, Sanja, 8, 19

J

Jacir, Emily, 50
 Jaggat, Alison M., 31, 39, 41
 Jaio, Miren, 219
 Jakubowska, Agata, xxv, xxxiii, 29,
 40, 99, 100, 112, 184, 185, 324
 Jansen, Pearl, 316, 318
 Jansone, Rasa, 264-283
 Jarska, Natalia, 171, 172, 173, 185
 Jefferies, Janis, 145
 Jimenez, Margarita, 307, 308, 313
 Jin, Cai, 75, 81-82, 92, 93, 94
 Johnson, Pamela, 146
 Johnson, Steve, 136, 139
 Jolly, Peter, 315, 316, 321
 Jonas, Joan, 123
 Jones, Allen, 309
 Jones, Amelia, 211, 212, 215
 Jones, Guno, 153
 Joseph, Maxwell, 311
 Judah, Hettie, 161, 169
 Jürgessen, Birgit, 126

Jurjāne, Aija, 264-283
Justesen, Kirsten, 126

K

Kabakov, Emilia, 158
Kadyrova, Zhanna, 234
Kafer, Alison, 285, 286, 288, 305
Kaiser, Monika, 122, 126, 132
Kakhidze, Alevtina, 234
Kaplan, Caren, 21, 22, 41, 49, 53
Kapur, Geeta, 157
Kasahara, Michiko, 157
Kataoka, Mami, 151-152, 159-161, 164, 169
Kavelina, Dana, 227, 237, 239-242, 247, 249-250
Kazuko, Miyamoto, 159, 164, 165
Keane, Tina, 123
Kee, Joan, 157
Kelly, Mary, 136, 317, 318
Kennedy, Florynce, 62, 72
Kenny, Annie, 312
Kheirhah, Maria, xxxi, 43-58, 324
Khomenko, Lesia, 234
Kimiyo, Mishima, 159
Kingston, Angela, 141, 149
Kiss Kiss Bang Bang (2007-2008), 155, 214
Kittay, Eva Feder, 294, 305
Kleege, Georgina, 289, 305
Ko, Dorothy, 78
Kokoli, Alexandra, xvii, xxxiii, 307-322, 324
Kolrud, Kristine and Marina Prusac, 310, 321
Kopytsia, Alina, 234
Kościańska, Agnieszka, 101
Kotík, Charlotta, 157
Kotz, Liz, 68, 72
Kowalczyk, Izabela, 173, 185
Kowanz, Brigitte, 123
Krasniqi, Viollca, 13, 14, 19
Kraștiņa, Sandra, 269, 275, 282
Krauss, Rosalind, 215
Kreisky, Bruno, 122
KT press Feminist Art Observatory, xix, xxxiii, 31, 42
Kudors, Andis, 266, 283
Kudria, Iryna, 237
Kukaine, Jana, xxxiii, 264-283, 325
Kulchynska, Lesia, 229, 236, 249
Kulikovska, Maria, 229, 230
Kun Teng, 81
Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn (1985), xxxii, 117-132, 328
Künstlerinnengruppe Erfurt, 103
Kusama, Yayoi, 158
Kvindeudstillingen XX (The Women's Exhibition XX) Copenhagen (1975), 122

L

La Cooperativa del Beato Angelico, 199
La eskalera karakola, 209
Lacy, Suzanne, 159, 164
Lagarde, Marcela, 254, 262
Lamm, Kimberly, xxxi, 59-74, 325
Larios, Pablo, 160
Lassnig, Maria, 124, 126, 127, 132
Latour, Bruno, 311, 321
Layzell, Richard, 136
Lazard, Carolyn, 285, 287, 292-294
Lebovici, Elisabeth, 157
Lee, Darlene, 86, 92
León, Nuria, 207, 212, 218, 221
Levi, Inga, 244
Lévi-Strauss, Claude, 10
Lewis, Reina, 47
Li, Xinmo, 75, 81-85, 92, 93
Liao, Wen, 76, 79, 80, 81, 92
Libkind, Katya, 244
Libreria delle donne, 190, 191
Ling & Comma, 75, 87-89
Linker, Kate, 215

Lippard, Lucy, xxv, xxxiii, 127, 132, 187, 188, 202, 211, 219
 Loda, Romana, 195, 199
 Lolavar, Soosan, 50, 57
 Lonzi, Carla, 191, 201, 202
 Looking Forward, Looking Inward (2009), 162, 169
 Lorde, Audre, 60, 61, 72
 Low, Yvonne, 297
 Lowthorpe, Philippa, 315
 Lozano, Encarni, 212
 Lugosi, Bela, 52
 Luhaka, Théodore, 252
 Lyotard, Jean Francois, 31, 41
 Lysovenko, Kateryna, 227, 245, 246, 247

M

Maderna, Angela, xxxii, 187-202, 325
 MAGNA (1975), 125, 126, 127, 128, 131, 132
 Maharaj, Sarat, 146
 Mahmood, Saba, 47, 57
 Majewska-Güde, Karolina, xxxii, 95-114, 326
 Malaia, Kateryna, 265, 268, 283
 Malallah, Hanaa, 43, 54
 Maple, Sarah and Beverley Knowles, 320, 321
 Marano, Virginia, xxxiii, 285-306, 326
 Marasca, Teresa, 187, 192
 Marcuse, Herbert, 128, 129, 132
 Margolles, Teresa, 161, 163, 168
 Mari, Valeria, xxxii, 151-170, 326
 Marincola, Paula, 147
 Marinucci, Elena, 189, 202
 Mark, Lisa Gabrielle, 130, 131, 156, 166, 168
 Marling, Raili and Redi Koobak, 268, 283
 Marusyn, Olha, 244
 Marx, Karl, 26, 129, 131, 132
 Marzo, Jorge Luis, 204, 205, 207, 222, 259
 Massey, Doreen, 69
 Mateos, Pedro Merchan xxxii, 203-224, 327
 Mayayo, Patricia, 204, 205, 211, 213, 220, 221, 222
 Mayer, Mónica, 255
 Mazzoli, Emilio, 200
 Mbatha-Raw, Gugu, 315-317, 322
 McArthur, Park and Constantina Zavitsanos, 293, 294, 305
 McNay, Lois, 14, 19, 314, 321
 Mecca Leisure Group, 311
 Méndez, Germán Labrador, 205, 222
 Méndez, Lourdes, 214, 221
 Mendoza, Mónica, 257
 Meng, Yue, 78
 Meng, Yue and Jinhua Dai, 78, 92
 Mercer, Kobena, 48, 57
 Meretoja, Hanna, 55, 57
 Merlin, Monica, 77, 79, 80, 93, 312, 321
 Meskimmon, Marsha, xxxi, 59, 69, 70, 72, 151, 153, 166, 167
 Mesnage, Alice and Marie G., 255, 262
 Messenger, Annette, 158
 Mičulis, Modris, 279
 Mies, Maria, 21, 22, 25-29, 36-37, 70-71
 Mignolo, Walter, 25
 Milevska, Suzana, xxxi, 3-20, 327
 Miller, Nancy, 215
 Milner, Rebecca, 162
 Min, Dongchao, 79, 93
 Minh-ha, Trinh T., 43, 55, 57
 Mir, Carlota, 212, 219
 Miralles, Fina, 212
 Mirri, Sabina, 187, 192, 193, 200
Miss World, xxxiii, 307-322
 Mistral, Gabriela, 254

Mitra, Durba, 62, 63, 72
 Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, 3, 18,
 20, 35, 41, 59, 66-67, 70-72, 294,
 305
 Molina, Inés, 216
 Mołojec-Bernatowicz, Barbara,
 175, 185
 Molokoiedova, Daria, 244
 Moorhead, J., 316, 322
 Moravec, Lisa, xxxii, 117-132, 328
 Moraza, Juan Luis, 218
 Moreno, Luisa López, 210, 216,
 223
 Morgan, Robin, 62, 63, 72, 140
 Morley, Eric, 311, 319, 321
 Morris, Frances, 161
Motherhood (2015), 237
 Mouffe, Chantal, 210, 223
 Mrozik, Agnieszka, 101, 102, 112,
 172
 Muholi, Zanele, 48
 Mujeres Creando, 251, 253, 256-
 257, 262
*Mujeres en el arte español
 contemporáneo (1900-1984)*,
 209
 Mujeres en las Artes Visuales
 (MAV), 221
 Mujeres Públicas, 251, 258
 Muller, Dena, 158, 170
 Mulvey, Laura, xxxiii, 124, 307-
 322, 324, 325
 Muro, Paz, 212
 Musgrave, Lisa Ryan, 33, 41
 Mutu, Wangechi, 43, 48, 54

N

Nader, Luiza, 103
 Nair, Varsha, 294-300, 305
 Nakaya, Fujiko, 123
 Nakonechna, Lada, 234
 Nałkowska, Zofia, 111
 NAMI Network, 260

Namlaghi, Malek, 319, 320, 321
 Nana, Preenun, 295
 Nash, Jennifer C., 5, 6, 19
 Navarrete, Carmen, 214, 218
 Navarra, Vera, 190, 202
 Nengudi, Senga, 70, 159, 170
 Neshat, Shirin, 50
 Ni Una Menos, 254
 Nochlin, Linda, 46, 68, 151-163,
 172-173, 214-215
 NousToutes (France), 252
*n.paradoxa: international feminist
 art journal* (1998-2017), xxii,
 xxxi, 6, 12, 21-42, 86, 92, 158,
 164, 221, 295, 324
 Nunung WS, 160, 164, 165

O

Oberhuber, Oswald, 126
 Olave, Elena, 208, 216, 223
 Onishchenko, Daria, 229
 Ono, Yoko, 124, 125
 Oppenheim, Meret, 125-127
 Orlan, 123
 Ostojić, Tanja, 3, 11, 14-16
 Owens, Craig, 215
 Owidzka, Jolanta, 99

P

Pachmanova, Martina, xxii, xxxiii
 Pagano, Magdalena, 258
 Pagulich, Lesia and Tatsiana
 Shchurko, 266, 283
 Pankhurst, Emmeline, 312
 Panno, Laura, 187, 192, 195
 Paredes, Julieta, 251, 256, 257, 260
 Parker, Rozsika, 32, 41, 140, 146,
 147, 150
Parks and Recreation (TV, 2009-
 2015), 308
 Parra, Violeta, 254
 Pavlychko, Solomiia, 231, 250

Payne, Antonia, 136, 141
 Pejić, Bojana, 8, 19
 Pérez Villén, Ángel, 211, 223
 Pérez-Ratton, Virginia, 157
Perfect Match (2001), 9-12
 Petersen, Anne Ring, 33, 41
 Petrova, Valentyna, 237, 241
 Pfeffer, Andrea Elisabeth, 126, 132
 Philippi, Desa, 143, 150
 Phipps, Alison, 55, 57
 Pichler, Cathrin, 119, 123, 124, 127
 Piedade, Vilma, 260, 261, 262
 Pijoan, Olga L., 212
 Pinińska-Bereś, Maria, 99, 112, 184
 Piotrowski, Kazimierz, 179, 181-2
 Piotrowski, Piotr, 173
 Piper, Adrian, 124, 211
 Plakhotnik, Olga, 231, 235, 250
Plus Ultra (1992), 206, 211
 Plutyńska, Eleonora, 99
 Poe, Alison, 110
 Polovinko, Marharyta, 242, 243, 244, 250
 Ponger, Lisl, 123
 Pongracz, Cora, 126
 Potter, Sally, 123
 Praznik, Katia, 106, 112
 Preciado, Paul B., 220
 Prischl-Maier, Monika, 119, 123, 124, 127
Private Thoughts Public Speaking (1986), 134, 136, 137, 150
 Probyn, Elspeth, 265, 280, 283
 Prochazka, Elsa, 119
 Puar, Jasbir K., 285, 287, 295, 306

Q

Quemin, Alain, 30, 42

R

Radford, Jill and Diana Russell, 254, 262
 Rago, Margareth, 259
 Ralko, Vlada, 227, 233, 234
 Reckitt, Helena, 158, 170
 Reilly, Maura, 68, 151-163, 166, 170, 214
 Repše, Gundega, 268, 281, 283
 Reus, Teresa Gómez, 215
 Revolutionary Experiment Prostrir, 234
 Ribalta, Jorge, 206, 223
 Richter, Dorothee, 154, 170
 Robinson, Hilary, xxviii, xxxiv, 155
 Robinson, Jo, 312, 316, 321
 Robleño, Paula García, 211, 222
 Rogoff, Irit, 13
 Rosaldo, Michelle, 67
 Rosario CGT group, 259
 Rosas, María Ángeles Layuno, 205, 222
 Rosenbach, Ulrike, 123, 126
 Rosler, Martha, xxviii, xxxiv, 123, 264, 325
 Rozentāle, Anna, 277
 Rozentsveih, Viktoriia, 244
 Rubin, Gayle, 10
 Rubio, Pepa, 212

S

Sadley, Wojciech, 99
 Said, Edward, 43
 Salem, Sara, 6
 Sander, Helke, 123
 Sansour, Larissa, 43, 54
 Santolini, Anna Maria, 192
 Sassi, Marilena, 187, 192, 198
 Saunders, Yoyan, 123
 Sauzeau Boetti, Anne Marie, 195
 Saville, Jenny, 161, 163
 Schapiro, Miriam, 125

Schellander, Meine, 126
 Scherbyna, Anna, 237, 241
 Schneemann, Carolee, 124, 125, 126, 127
 Schoettle, Marian, 133, 135, 136, 140, 142-147, 149, 323
 Schöffauer, Karin, 126
 Schön, Eva-Maria, 124
 Schwarzer, Alice, 126
 Sebag-Montefiore, Poppy, 316, 322
 Sebastiane, 136
 Secondary Archive, 227-228, 242-245, 249-250, 323
 Sedgwick, Eve K., 216, 220, 222
 Segal, Alya, 228, 244, 250
 Segal, Lynn, 61, 315
 Segato, Rita, 251, 254, 262
 Serra, Patrizia, 196
 Sewing cooperative Shvemy, 237
 Shannon, Finnegan, 285-291, 304
 Sharpley, Anne, 312
 Shea, James, 133, 143
 Shelley, Mary, 47, 51
 Shen, Qingyu, xxxii, 75-94, 328
 Sherman, Cindy, 264
 Shohat, Ella, 18, 20, 48, 58
 Showalter, Elaine, 215
 Sigler, Carmen, 212
 Silverman, Kaja, 61, 73
 Simmons, Laurie, 264
 Simpson, Lorna, 59-74
 Singh, Arpita, 159
 Singh, Kavita, 167
 Sledziewska, Anna, 99
 Smith, Bonnie G., 152
 Smith, Roberta, 158
 Smith, Terry, 23
 Snaith, Yolande, 136
 Snyder, Joel, 289, 306
 Sokołowska, Magdalena, 100
 Solomon-Godeau, Abigail, 215
 Sorokovaya, Anna, 237
 Soun-Gui, Kim, 159

Spivak, Gayatri, xxx, xxxiv, 3, 14, 19, 21, 24, 31, 41-45, 48, 55, 58
 Standing, Kathryn, 136
 Stelliferi, Paola, 188, 202
 Stern, Marguerite, 253
 Stötzer, Gabriele, 103
 Synytsia, Karina, 244
 Szczupacka, Wiktoria, xxxii, 171-186, 328

T

Tanska, Sana Shamuradova, 244, 249
 Tate, Shirley Anne, 318
 Taylor, Barbara, 145, 317
Ten Artists (1973), 127
 Teng, Kun, 81
Territorios indefinidos (1995), 217
The Cave of the Golden Rose (2019), 241, 250
The Empty Dress (1994), 140
The Feminist Art Project, 156
The Subversive Stitch (1988), 140, 145, 146, 147, 150
 Thomas, Deb, 136
 Thornton, Minna, 137, 150
 Tickner, Lisa, 120, 121, 130, 132, 312, 322
 Tillman, Lynne, 123
 Tokuyama, Hirokazu, 159, 160, 164, 169
 Toledo, Laureana, 255
 Tong, Yujie, 79, 85, 86
 Townsley, Jill, 133, 138, 139
Trans Sexual Express (1999), 217
 Traoré, Adama, 252
 Trasforini, Maria Antonietta, 189, 202
 Trujillo, Gracia, 207, 223
 Tuck, Eve and K. Wayne Yang, 154, 170
12 al 2000. Donna arte (12 to 2000. Woman Art), 187, 196, 197, 202

U

Ueareworakul, Nitaya, 294, 295
 Ujzadowska, Wiola, xxxii, 95-98,
 107-110
 Ujma, Magdalena, 173, 185
Ukrainian Body (2012), 236, 249
 Urabe, Naomi, 295

V

V.B.K.O. (Vienna), xx
 Valcárcel, Amelia, 214
 Vergine, Lea, 192, 202, 325
 Vienna Feminist Actionism, 130,
 131
 Vila, Fefa, 214, 218, 219, 220
 Vilarós, Teresa, 205, 208, 223
 Villaespesa, Mar, 203-204, 208-
 211, 213-218, 220-221, 223
 Viot, Nathalie, 219
 Visglerio, Lola, 206, 211
 Visual Culture Research Center in
 Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, 236
 Voski, Arlene and Barbara Haber
 Avakian, 265, 283

W

WACK! (2007), 69, 72, 130, 131,
 156, 157, 161, 166, 168
 Wages for Housework, 26
 Walby, Sylvia, 28, 42
 Walchli, T., 50, 58
 Walker, Kara, 48
 Wallerstein, Immanuel, 21, 22, 24,
 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31, 33, 35, 42
 Wallin, Scott, 289, 305
 Wang, Liping, 84
 Wang, Zheng, 78, 79
 Ward, David, 136
 Warner, Michael, 216
 Warsame, Hodan, 154
 Wason, Sarah, 136

Watt, Judith, 138
 Watts, Sarah, 133, 139, 140
 Weibel, Peter, 23, 40, 126, 132, 321
 Weinreb, Alice, 267, 283
What in Me is Feminine? (2015),
 238, 249
 White, Robin, 159, 164, 170
 Wieczorek, Gabriela Traple, xxxii,
 251-263, 329
 Wiggins, Jenny, 136
 Williams, Lois, 136, 138
 Williams-Finlay, Bob, 291, 306
 Wilson, Sarah, 312, 321
 Winteler, Anna, 124
 Witt, Charlotte, 31, 42
 Włocławeks, 95, 105
 Wojciechowska, Krystyna, 175
 Wojtyna-Drouet, Krystyna, 175
 Wolff, Janet, xxii, xxxiii, 215
 Wolffer, Lorena, 251, 255, 257-258
 Wollen, Peter, 124, 143, 310, 322,
 325
Womanhouse (1972), 125, 126
Womanifesto, 285, 287, 294-300
Women about Women (2018), 241
Women Artists in War (2024), 228,
 244, 250
Women at War (2022), 228
Women in Black, 312
Women in Revolt (2023), 133, 140,
 141, 150
 Women's League, Gallery of
 (1976-1980, Poland), 171-186
 Wu, Hung, 76, 92
 Wu, Wei, 84

X

Xie, Wenqian, 76
 Xu, Qiaosi, 84

Y

Yalom, Marylin, 274, 283

Yanagi, Miwa, 161, 162
Yeremieieva, OIia, 244
Yo Si Te Creo, 254
Yong, Xian, 84
Young, Elli, xvii
Young, Linsey, 140

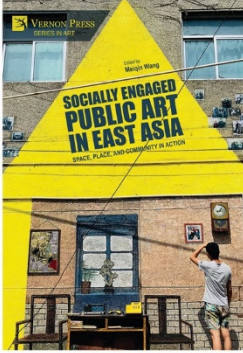
Z

Zabuzhko, Oksana, 231, 232, 250
Zaharijević, Adriana, 266, 283
Zarebski, Krzysztof, 178-18
Zborovska, Nila, 231
Zetkin, Clara, 236
Zhou, Wenjing, 76, 87, 89-91, 94
Zhu, Qi, 82
Zhurzhenko, Tetiana, 231, 232,
250
Zlobina, Tamara, 238
Zolghadr, Tirdad, 50, 58
Zona F (2000), 217
Zviagintseva, Anna, 234
Zychowicz, Jessica, 228, 231, 235,
250
Zylinska, Joanna, 106, 113



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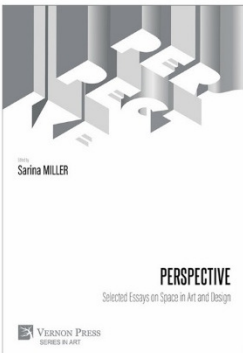
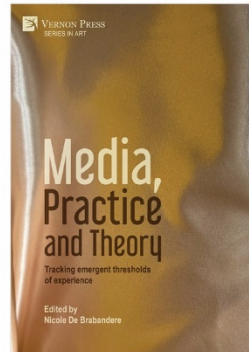
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