

Corrections, interrogations and politics of local/global exchanges in feminist art criticism

[*Correções, interrogatórios e políticas de intercâmbio local/global na crítica de arte feminista*

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ABSTRACT • In this essay, I outline what an art history of feminist art criticism might consist of and argue that it should not be confined either to a return to “origin” stories of a few great critics or a focus only on what a critic says about their encounter with an artwork. Instead, I suggest attending to other ways of accessing feminist art criticism’s creation of discourse locally and globally, namely 1) through interviews with artists, 2) in thematic essays which attempt to redefine feminism and art and 3) by examining the focus of feminist art journals and magazines. • **KEYWORDS** • Feminist art criticism; contemporary art; history of art criticism. • **RESUMO** • Neste

ensaio, descrevo em que pode consistir uma história da arte da crítica de arte feminista e argumento que ela não deve se limitar a um retorno às histórias de “origem” de alguns grandes críticos ou focar apenas no que um crítico diz sobre o seu encontro com uma obra de arte. Em vez disso, sugiro procurar outras formas de aceder à criação de discurso da crítica de arte feminista local e global, nomeadamente 1) através de entrevistas com artistas, 2) em ensaios temáticos que tentam redefinir o feminismo e a arte e 3) examinando o foco da arte feminista em jornais e revistas. • **PALAVRAS-CHAVE** • Crítica de arte feminista; arte contemporânea; história da crítica de arte.

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ON THE WHAT, WHERE AND HOW OF FEMINIST ART CRITICISM

Contrary to the existing negative rhetoric about feminism's diminution or lack of relevance, feminist art criticism and art history is a rapidly expanding area accelerating in the last 30 years,² and a truly global phenomenon. Art criticism has been the means through which, since the early 1970s, some very local manifestations of feminism in art practice have become global in reach. The potentially 50+ year history of feminist art criticism is still largely "unwritten" and lacks any simple narrative form to make it "graspable" in relation to feminist art history or feminist art practices,³ even though there are several essays which try and do this (LIPPARD, 1976; FRUEH, 1988; RAVEN, 1994; DEEPWELL, 2002 and 2023) and many which have attempted to define what feminist art or feminist art practices are. Occasionally, populist and journalistic articles position what feminist art criticism is as a commentary on the state of feminist art "now" (typically tracing an emergent or dying movement). In other articles, a vision of progress towards "intersectional approaches" or the increased "representation" of women in exhibitions take the temperature in mood about "feminism now" as coverage of seasons of women-focused shows or changes in statistics of women artists shown, and often, if unsurprisingly, continue to find patterns of censorship, backlash and regression (AHN, 2019; REILLY, 2015; CARTER, 2016). Feminism deployed in this way only underlines how it is not a "fashion trend" and its long history cannot be cancelled with the focus on feminism as only "new/now" or constantly "emerging". Like art production, the forms of feminist art criticism have been neither static or formulaic and the arguments raised have changed.

2 James Elkins, discussing art criticism, included a graph of the volume of articles from searching the database "The Bibliography of Art History" for art theoretical terms including "feminism", but he did not discuss why this keyword produced the largest result (ELKINS, 2007). Any search in other commonly used art research databases will produce similarly large results: in October 2018, Proquest's database Art Bibliographies Modern (which goes back to 1982) produced 6, 483 results in searches for "Feminist Art". With so many articles across a very dispersed field, would data-mining help, to trawl how and where feminism and feminist art is discussed?

3 See Stecher (2023).

The long-standing tendency of art magazines to publish a single feminist article per issue superficially quarantines, isolates or limits understanding about feminism to 'singular', 'rare' or 'exceptional' perspectives. A situation which stands in contrast to how frequently these articles are now published. Over 100 art magazines have produced special issues on "Feminism" from 1970-present, including this one, as well as: *Art News*, *Third Text*, *Opus International*, *Heute Kunst*, *Art Papers*, *ArtLink* and *Studio International*.⁴ This repeated focus on feminism is both accommodating and containing. While James Elkins complained art criticism is massively produced, but poorly consumed (ELKINS, 2007), perhaps the massive production of articles produced reflecting on feminism deserves more attention, or digestion, than this.

If art criticism's references to the politics of feminism(s) in relation to contemporary art have become visible in many cosmopolitan and international exchanges, this has also been how these ideas travel (alongside the curatorial work of the blockbuster exhibition, the circuits of art biennales or the distribution of art journals) across borders and languages. Yet, feminist art criticism's presence needs also to be understood as closely linked to activities of women artists' exhibitions or groups, feminist conferences/events, and a diversity of publications as well as media productions on art, from blogs to TV programmes. It is not just reporting on what happened but a generative discourse in the sense of producing future possibilities. Occasional articles about feminist art have appeared in a wide range of cultural and philosophy journals, including feminist ones where literature or film generally take precedence when the arts are discussed. However, there are and have been more than 60 specialist women's art or feminist art magazines, that have existed from 1970-present, in many countries around the world and this is why a section of this essay considers these specialist magazines should be at the heart of any history of what constitutes feminist art criticism for their producers and readers.

Collating the many individual articles that name or refer to feminism might suggest a self-evident quality of this writing is the predominance of individual women critics (or interviews with them) who name themselves or are known as feminist (Lippard, Raven, Johnston, Kraus, Blom, de Zegher) or as a label for anthologies of their writings (of which there are many).⁵ The primary marker that does distinguish feminist art criticism, from art criticism in general is a politics of commitment to women artists and the analysis of their work as a contribution to art and art's histories. However, this notion of (political) commitment entails writing about women artists differently from mainstream approaches or standard formats for writing about art and artists and in the section on the thematic essay, I attempt to demonstrate what this means. The 'feminism' in these articles looks self-evident where feminist (political) issues are referenced (violence against women/motherhood/the politics of housework or care) in the work discussed; or as the name for any interpretations produced about artworks by women artists named as "feminist" or where distinctions between the feminine or feminist in both art and criticism are drawn. Unfortunately, even including one of these four types of

4 These are listed in The Feminist Art Observatory (KT Press, Special issues..., n. d.)

5 KT Press, Anthologies (n. d.) lists over 300 anthologies.

criticism is not sufficient to define feminist art criticism – the author, the subject or the mention of feminism in the article – because it is about what the cultural/political argument is aiming for.

Meanwhile, the notion that feminism is singular, an ideology, a perspective, persists. The negative effect of this is that feminist art criticism is offered as a single reference point which a critic or reader must adopt or reject: a unique lens by its supporters or an ideological “blinker” by its detractors. The topics, issues or ideas that feminist art criticism tackle do not only appear when women artists are discussed or when reviews of all-women exhibitions are published (many of these reports are not-feminist and avoid discussing feminism as opposed to being anti-feminist!). While in academic circles, feminist art criticism has emerged as an “optional” practice of reading/interpreting or thinking about contemporary artworks by women in many monographic essays, this is not its only form. Many men write about the same women artists and works, but few of these analyses could be called feminist or even discuss feminism at all.

Part of the problem today in discussing art criticism lies in the fact that much art criticism is not critical, but purely promotional. Art criticism has often been reduced to the status of purely reactive commentary by art historians as they pick over and quote from it in their own accounts and prioritise their critical evaluations. Distinguishing between this promotional and repetitious reportage (echoing the press releases of art galleries) in the volume of articles or column inches on an artist, however, does not rest on a distinction between jobbing journalism and serious academic work, because many art critics are also academics or curators and write extended essays or books. It is about distinguishing where and when their opinions are insightful as opposed to repetitions of press releases or artists’ statements. Given these problems of art criticism’s reduction to either promotion or a bell weather of initial reactions to what is “new”, all writing which discusses feminism cannot be easily linked to what constitutes feminist art criticism, but this is not to say this form of art criticism can only be understood by “other criteria”.

If we no longer consider the exhibition review or the essay about one artist as the centre of what constitutes art criticism, maybe a different picture of other forms of discussion or dialogue generated by art criticism will emerge. It is possible to see different strategies emerge in individual women critics who identified themselves strongly with feminism, but it is important to remember that it has not been just one or two women critics who saw their work as feminist. In the 1970s, there were many women writing about the emergence of feminist art practices. Yet, the history of struggle, disagreements and debates within feminist art criticism appears to circulate in limited, even repetitive references to only a few names, which is why one section of this essay is devoted to rethinking one “origin” story. Maybe, these disputes and this history can only be “recovered” and “re-constructed” after the fact of their production, but it remains necessary to do this historical work, if we want to consider the many differences between feminisms. The legacy of other forms and approaches to art criticism continues to appear in contemporary feminist art criticism, by providing the language, terms and reference points for how to discuss feminism and contemporary art.

AN ORIGIN STORY FOR FEMINIST ART HISTORY, BUT NOT ART CRITICISM

In a discussion on 4 May 2018 at Haus der Kunst, Germany, Lara Demori opened “Feminism and Art Theory Now” by citing the importance of Linda Nochlin’s ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’ (NOCHLIN, 1971). There is nothing unusual in this attribution, it might even be regarded as a common foundational idea that Nochlin’s essay is the starting point for all discussion of ‘art and sexual politics’ (BAKER and HESS, 1973). As Lara Demori highlighted, this title is now a fashion statement, an iconic question, lionised by Maria Grazia Chiuri’s new t-shirt design for Dior (Spring 2018). The gap between 1971 and 2018, in Demori’s opening remarks, was filled by reference to only two major exhibitions in 2007, *WACK!* (SFMOMA), curated by Connie Butler, and *Global Feminisms* (Brooklyn Museum) curated by Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly (DEMORI, 2018). Here, a US origin in the 1970s is compared with or creates the global contemporary (or a regional one) for feminisms today. Her two panellists, Griselda Pollock and Angela Dimitrikaki, both of whom have long and very different histories of interventions in art history and art theory as a discipline from the UK, were asked to address the difficult question of ‘where feminism is now?’ They proceeded to do so by reference to their own critical projects and their remarks were published in a ‘Feminisms’ edition of *eFlux* journal (POLLOCK, 2018; DIMITRIKAKI, 2018).

The ill-formed question implied in the frequently cited title of Nochlin’s essay continues to result in a search for “great women artists” (and it is assumed art criticism’s role is to provide reasons for their greatness) on whom it is assumed “the public” needs more education or more information (as the information-centred databases of *AWARE*, the Feminist Art Database at the Brooklyn Museum or *Art+Feminism*’s interventions on Wikipedia all attest). This trope to explain “greatness” for a few, as a substitute for the actual cultural absence of women, is even more prevalent in neo-liberal accounts of women’s achievements today, which continue to consider biology as determinant (for women) and regard institutions at fault for not recognising them or their works. The fact that Nochlin’s essay actually argues against ‘biology as destiny’, presents a critique of genius, and highlights bias in education, museums and art history (as institutionalised practices) is strangely negated by today’s celebration of the title. Elizabeth Baker, whose article appeared in *Art News* alongside Nochlin’s, expressed a common belief in the 1970s that ‘art has no sex’ and that the numbers of “serious” women artists was low, even as she highlighted feminist protests at the Whitney Museum demanding 50% representation to counter institutional discrimination (1970) in which Faith Ringgold and Lucy Lippard (among others) had participated (BAKER, 1971; BAKER and HESS, 1973). The idea ‘art has no sex’ was itself a resistance to the feminine stereotype, that women artists would only be interesting if they made “feminine” art, as any attempt to make work “like men”, either unsexed them for competing with men or underlined their role as only followers. Eight prominent women artists were asked by *Art News* to respond to Nochlin’s essay in *Art News* and how “women’s lib” related to art: many fell into this trap set by “greatness” and searched for it. Many remarked Nochlin’s argument was “simplified” because they did not see “obstacles” in the contemporary

status quo and regarded today as markedly different from the 500 years of history Nochlin discusses (Elaine de Kooning). They argued against masculine-feminine labels in art (Louise Nevelson) ; emphasised work and intellectual labour as the motivation for making work (Lynda Benglis) ; were repulsed by Women's Liberation "bra-burning" but supported women's new-found self-awareness (Suzy Gablik) ; and argued that being an artist was not about filling a job vacancy (Rosemary Castoro) (EIGHT ARTISTS REPLY, 1971). Only Eleanor Antin agreed with Nochlin because she supported Nochlin's idea that the question in the title was a "useless" one and a diversion from real questions confronting women in the arts (EIGHT ARTISTS REPLY, 1971). Nochlin's essay rapidly became a set-text on many art history courses as "the answer" to women's liberation and revision of art history and it still is used in this way (especially when it is the only feminist text given), but it continues to provoke similar allergic reactions to those cited. However, what is really significant about these reactions is that Nochlin barely touches issues relevant to the situation of contemporary art. Updated encounters of Nochlin's argument have turned its negative search "why have there been" to positive affirmation while highlighting how discriminations persist, insisting that "there have always been great Black women artists" (BURMAN, 1986) or asking ironically if there "have there really been" women artists in modern Egypt (ATALLAH, 2021) and proving otherwise by offering examples.

Much more problematic in today's global contexts is the frequent assertion by women artists, that 1) feminism was invented in the West and imported to other parts of the world (even when careers have been formed through women's art exhibitions or where gender equality was official state policy at work, but not in the arts), or 2) the reasons for so few women artists succeeding is because of the negative impact on women artists who have children (XIANG JING cited in MERLIN, 2013). The rigid separation between art as a public statement and the artist's life as personal (private and separate) is often repeated today as a strategy to block again the negative alignment between the sex of the artist and the quality of what they produce. These are all updated versions of the idea "art has no sex", because the sex of the artist should not count in the way a work of art is judged. However, all too frequently when biographical/pseudo-psychological approaches to profiling artists are written, the references always return to what it means to be a woman, as a different kind of thing to what it means to be an artist.

Demori's framing of feminism raises another problem: the present in feminism is now always seen against major exhibitions in museums which celebrate the 1970s and position this story as "America first". This argument is always presented generationally through pioneers and followers as if the present erases the past, rather than any serious re-consideration of the large number of these exhibitions as a huge number of "firsts" releasing new possibilities or approaches to feminisms, across many media, countries or generations. In practically every year since 1975, there has been at least one major international feminist art exhibition in one part of the world or another and whole seasons of exhibitions have been organised (not least the many around 2007, but also the Feminist Art Coalition in USA, 2019-2021), in addition to nationally organised ones or local artists self-organised exhibitions

across many different countries. Feminism is not confined to a few “defining” blockbuster exhibition of women artists with a feminist thesis or just the most recent, *Empowerment*, at Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, for example (BEITIN; KOCH; RUHKAMP, 2022). While this lack of memory functions as a convenient journalistic trope to present the “new” in feminism as “now”, it is rare that these claims for reinvention of new kinds of feminism are deep-rooted.

Perhaps we should welcoming the new tendency in recent years for more sustained revisions and new forms of programming focusing on women artists in museum collections, alongside new purchasing strategies. Elles@Centre Pompidou, organised by Camille Morineau, in 2010 increased the purchases of women artists to 20% of the collection. Tate Modern’s rehang in 2016 dramatically prioritised women in the collection at 30% and 50% of solo rooms under its first woman director, Frances Morris, and the Tate is reputedly reaching 30% works by women in its actual contemporary international art collection. Sao Paulo’s Museum of Contemporary Art dedicated a whole year to the subject of women artists in 2019-2020, with international historical and contemporary exhibits and solo exhibitions of Brazilian women artists (PEDROSA; RJEILLE; LEME, 2022). MOMA, New York’s 5-year plan and Stockholm’s Moderna Museet’s ‘Museum of our Wishes’ (2010) (critiqued in SKRUBBE, 2016), however, have not necessarily meant more women’s work was purchased or shown, only that these museums were seen to be adopting different strategies of display. Protest at an institution for not showing women artists, has given way to a different focus on “how” to show women’s work, given the gaps in collections after years of failure to acquire key works considered important to feminism by women artists (JACOBSON, 2018).

So, I would propose that the framing of feminist art criticism might be better identified by considering not “firsts” or “origins” or “greats” – in a few writers – but the engagement with and through interviews and thematic essay that a feminist art critic’s work exemplifies other tropes in art criticism than the exhibition review or monographic essay.

THE INTERVIEW

An early feminist approach to interviewing women artists, as an alternative form of art criticism, can be found in *Art Talk* (1975), where Cindy Nemser collected interviews with 13 women artists, including Marisol, Alice Neel, Sonia Delaunay and Nancy Grossman. As one of the founders of the *Feminist Art Journal* (1972-1977), she published many other conversations with “prominent women” artists, including Nancy Spero and Janet Fish. Nemser challenged stereotypes about femininities/masculinities and sexist assumptions found in art criticism of women’s art production highlighting how: “critical vocabulary is rife with sexual; and sexist connotations; critical assessment of both men and women’s work often has been based on the biological sexual functions of the artists rather than on the aesthetic merits of their artistic products” (NEMSER, 1972). This assessment of how sex/gender as a system was often used against women underpinned her determination to profile

both women's personal lives and their art in "professional" terms. However, Nemser did not ask these women questions about feminism, she asked instead questions about the impact of childhood experiences and education, and how these experiences of being a woman affected the type of work that each artist made, as well as their relations with their male and female peers. Nemser's work was criticised by many other feminists as a form of "art world feminism", of "branding" individuals as great and reinforcing current art norms, because of how the interviews were organised (DUNCAN, 1975; ROM, 1982). Lucy Lippard even described it as "not-feminism" (LIPPARD, 1976). For Lippard, this kind of "art-world feminism" had raised challenges to issues of representation, but its solutions do not disrupt the methods or practices of the mainstream, they simply provide more artists, more novelty, more fodder for the system, more attempts by individuals – artists, curators, and critics – to further their careers and, as she put it, to gain 'a larger slice of the pie' (LIPPARD, 1976). In the current neo-liberal climate, this form of art-world feminism is very dominant again, highlighting discrimination (REILLY, 2015), looking at gendered use of language, and emphasising methods for profiling women as artists, as "personalities" through life-stories and to gain visibility. We are still caught in the failure to distinguish between providing information about individual artists and their backgrounds and art criticism and this is in spite of the many catalogues of women artists from different regions of the world which seek to introduce women artists into a greater international dialogue with their peers – e. g. Singapore (TAN, 2011) or The Philippines (BIANPOEN; WARDANI; DIRGANTORO, 2007). Since 2018, there has been an explosion of popular books on "great women artists" which offer "remarkable" stories of artists' lives and works, as exceptional personalities (even though once again, the variation in these books shows how many there are to choose from and profile).

Retrospectively, Nemser's book acquired significance as the words spoken by "great" women from the international avantgarde as well as those prominent in New York's art world. It was not, however, either sociology or gossip. Nemser's interviews, however, were not like today's celebrity-based culture where marketing underpins blatant self-promotion strategies in topical interviews to advertise an artist's latest exhibition or a new body of work (a common strategy pursued by artists in many art journals, *ArtForum*, *Studio International online*, *Flash Art* and weekend newspapers). These often describe the experience of meeting as an encounter, including random opinion questions, the Oh's and Mm's, the laughs or groans, unfinished sentences, interjections jokes and significant pauses in everyday life conversations. Occasionally some statements emerge about the artists' life or approach which may offer some insights into their working process. This mainstream "pop" quality for "creatives", selected as today's special subject, adds to most people's assessment of this form of interviewing as superficial or of passing interest. It is considered light entertainment, not serious discussion, and about character, not art. Rarely is the focus on in-depth questions about the work they produce.

Nemser's focus on biography and personal motivations or "being a woman" can be found in several subsequent interviewing projects about women artists (VOIGHT, 1996; BAIGELL and BAIGELL, 2001; VON BURDEN, 2012), where the women's studies

notion of “hearing women’s voices” prioritise oral history and first-hand accounts. A sociological approach where the same interview questions are used on different “subjects” has emerged in projects like Artist/Motherhood online (Performance and the Maternal) : <https://performanceandthematernal.com/mother-artist-interviews/> and ‘Art on My Mind’, <https://artonourmind.org.za/> in South Africa or as part of online documentation and research project and exhibitions like ‘Not Yet Written Stories: on women artists’ archives’ in Poland, Croatia, Slovenia and Latvia (2019-2022). If elements of artworld or personal “gossip” are present, they are not trivial, but indicate a viewpoint. While it has been a key point in women’s studies that women’s voices have not been heard or listened to, many feminists retain an interest in first-hand accounts of women’s experiences as women, believing that understanding life experience translates into understanding “being an artist”. Yet these interviews in academia don’t acquire the significance of what they are: oral histories of women artists, data (information) on lives lived and documents about their work. Maybe, in the future, such interviews will become the object of narrative research (TAMBOUKOU, 2015) or the presence of well-established women amongst these interviews make them into important documents of art communities or communities between women in a specific place and time. For the exhibition, *Empowerment* (BEITIN, KOCH and RUHKAMP, 2022), the catalogue strategically contained interviews with “lesser known” artists/artists’ groups from developing countries, foregrounding their ideas and voices for the first time.

Who is interviewed and what questions are asked is critical to the value of the interview, because it is the interviewer who establishes the frame and edits the copy, not the interviewee. The framework (work-centred or focused on views of feminism) also determines their value long-term as starting points for further research on women artists or feminist art criticism. For example, art historian’s allergic reactions (as a research method for the contemporary) prioritising quotes only from interviews they made themselves, with the necessary caveats about not prioritising the artist’s reading of their work as the only correct reading of the work. That there are different models for interviewing escapes people’s notice.

Using the interview to introduce new viewpoints on art and artists was the aim of the second part of Lippard’s book, *From the Center* (1975), published in the same year as *Art Talk*. Her “monographs” contained interviews with women artists (again largely in New York) whose works have today become iconic in feminist publications/exhibitions over the years, but at the time they represented new and emergent feminist tendencies, as well as people active in the women’s art movement: Jo Baer, Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold – the exception to the US-based focus is Hanne Darboven. Her questions were very different from Nemser’s, they were about the artworks produced, and how these works demonstrated artistic strategies and approaches to materials and subject-matter and she asked about the feminism in their approach to work. A dialogic approach is evident in the quotes and her discussion of work.

In 1999, I started a project in Dublin on a critic-in-residency at IMMA, which resulted in a book of interviews with women artists (DEEPWELL, 2005). The words in the title, *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, were chosen carefully, because 5 of

the 16 women no longer lived in Ireland's North (part of the UK) or the Irish Republic (a separate country, part of the EU), yet all had taken part in exhibitions representing contemporary Irish art and feminism. Ireland is a "place", an island land mass, resonant with different social/historical/political notions of "Irishness" as well as a contested political territory between Britain and Eire and it remains politically divided between North and South. Reflecting upon their own migration, as well as Irish mass migrations, prompted many of these artists to consider the links to Ireland as a place, to post-colonial critiques, to earlier generations, to the differences in experiences within their own family, or the social and political implications of events in Ireland's history. Each chapter contained a dialogue between an artist and myself, but the book became a document of feminist work in the 1990s. The discussions were wide-ranging but also very specific to the practices of each artist: examining art and politics, involvement in feminist art initiatives, approaches to history, identities as women/artists, subjects and themes tackled in particular works and conceptions of what belonging to or critically examining Irish nationalism / Republicanism/ Northern Irish politics and British Imperialism in 'The Troubles' as well as what the relatively new peace agreement (1998) meant for women. Most interviews take their form from the selection of interviewees, not just the focus of questions. I learnt to ask open questions and to encourage discussions of feminist politics, while editing each chapter with the artist's full co-operation. In an essay which followed the book's publication, I tried to examine 3 forms of art interviews, which might be characterised as biographical/oral history, lifestyle/promotional interviews and ideas-focused dialogues (DEEPWELL, 2007). My own practice (in the book) is in the latter camp, which are usually published in academic and scholarly journals, but my decision to pursue this form for feminist purposes (in the 30+ interviews I did with artists/curators in *n. paradoxa*, 1998-2017 and those that I published there by other people) was informed by my examination of the weaknesses of the other two approaches. The same approach can also be found in other projects interviewing feminist artists and writers (MARCHEVSKA and WALKERDINE, 2019; DODERER, 2008; PACHMANOVÁ, 2006; WEN, 2000).

It is worth mentioning that there are an increasing number of women critics who are the subject of interviews that outline their own practice and approach (Raven, Lippard), like curators, the interview has become a way of understanding a person's motivations and activities beyond what can be deduced from their writing and from these another history might be written.

The model of Lippard as an advocate and activist, both critic and curator was highly significant, not just in interviews but in her approach to themes and to documentation. Catriona Moore discusses how Lippard inspired women in Australia, identifying her direct influence on Toni Robertson's 1973 essay 'From Dabbler to Artist' as the first feminist art history essay in Australia (MOORE, 1994). Lippard was not alone in being both a critic and curator, who through exhibitions and articles have developed approaches to looking at feminism and contemporary art: Sylvia Eiblmayr (1985), Mirjam Westen, Bojana Pejic, Maria Lind, Catriona Moore (1994), Monica Mayer (2001) or Catherine de Zegher (2014) or the team behind *Re. Act. Feminism* (2008-2012).

THE THEMATIC ESSAY

Lucy Lippard's book *From the center: feminist essays on women's art* (LIPPARD, 1976) made an important distinction between feminism in the perspective of the critic and the practices of women artists. This distinction does not concern whether or not the artist agrees with the critic's interpretation, it is about how a feminist construction by the critic – through engagement, observation and reflection – brings concepts and ideas about women artists' practices together in new ways and promotes new frameworks for considering them. This book brought together her activities since 1971 as a critic/curator and discussed her own "changing" since her previous book, *Changing*, from her concerns with conceptual art, minimalism and dematerialisation towards activism and feminism. The subjects of the thematic essays in the book include: 'Sexual politics', 'What is female imagery?', 'Household Images in Art', 'Making Up: Role-playing and Transformation' and 'The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: European and American Women's Body Art'. These essays were not just responses to what she saw and people she met, they were commentaries on trends and tendencies that she regarded as could be found in many women artists' work and some were written as catalogue essays/curator's statements. In 1977 Lippard became involved in founding the feminist art journal *Heresies*, which was run by a collective of women who worked with other collectives of women on each special issue. Each 'ideas-focused' issue of *Heresies*, (27 issues, 1977-1993) developed a different theme about women's art and questions about feminism: e. g. on climate activism (#13, *EarthKeeping/EarthShaking*, vol. 4, no. 1 1981); on *The Great Goddess* (#5, 1977-1978); on *Lesbian Art and Artists* (#3, vol. 1, no. 3, Fall 1977); on *Satire* (#19, vol. 5, no. 3 (1985)); on *Art Education* (#25 vol. 7, no. 1, 1990). This idea of the thematic issue was an inspiration to me for *n. paradoxa*, which I founded in 1998 and developed across 40 volumes, revisiting and reinventing the collage effect of *Heresies* combination of interviews, opinion pieces, thematic essays and historical reassessments.

The thematic essays Lippard's *From the Center* emphasise a stronger social-democratic and alternative model of feminism as located in women's art practices, women-only shows, but also return again and again to themes where the critic was also a curator of work by women artists: including eccentric abstraction, conceptualism, domesticity, women's labour, performance art, as well as work which explicitly linked art and politics. This tendency became more pronounced in Lippard's later book about feminist activism, *Get The Message!* (LIPPARD, 1984). In several articles, Lippard has considered the function of art criticism (including feminist art criticism) in relation to art and politics as well as the role and responsibilities of the feminist art critic with socialist democratic ambitions (LIPPARD, 1984). The agendas suggested by *From the Center*, have had far-reaching consequences in debates and exhibitions structured around home/nation; performance art; the relationship between art and politics and feminine vs. feminist aesthetics and are frequent references.

Advocating for an *Art of Social Concern* (the title of her 1988 book) is another prominent feminist art critic, Arlene Raven, who taught on the Feminist Art Programme (Women's Building) in the 1970s-1980s and in the Feminist Art Studio, New York (RAVEN, 1998; RAVEN, 1988; MOODY, 2001). In her thematic essay, 'At Home'

– for a 1983 exhibition catalogue – she discusses the multiple associations of home and domestic space found in her detailed descriptions of the 1972 Womanhouse project and the activities generated by the Women’s Building in Los Angeles (RAVEN, 1988). Lippard and Raven’s emphasis on collective activist discourse is again prominent today, as it is based in a critique of art-world systems and art-world feminism, looking towards care (social reproductive labour), collective experiences, and activisms/artivism (DIMITRIKAKI and LLOYD 2017; *FEMINISMS*, 2018; DEEPWELL, 2020a). Lippard’s thematic essays have had considerable repercussions in terms of many other articles which seek to address again the issues she raised while reconsidering her perspectives, e. g. Deepwell’s (1996-1997) discussion of Lippard’s thesis about ‘pain and pleasure’ in performance art to compare the 1970s with the 1990s, or ‘House Work and Art Work’ (MOLESWORTH, 2000). These kinds of thematic essay formed the majority of the 500 articles published in *n. paradoxa* (1997-2017), which set out to encourage transnational and transgenerational comparisons as well as “new” readings of women artists’ practices.

Feminism did not just emerge in the New York art scene or in an East Coast-West Coast split in USA, in Europe many other critics started to work on feminist topics and ideas. Art critic, Aline Dallier-Popper’s position is different from either Lucy Lippard’s position of the critic as an outspoken “advocate” for groups of artists and political issues or Cindy Nemser’s approach to celebrating women’s achievements, and she wrote essays about feminism in the 1970s, when many others in the French art scene would not (COLLIN, 1997). She regarded feminism as an “object of study” – and she went on to found women’s studies courses on 19th and 20th C women artists in several French Universities. She pursued (in her words) a non-militant but determined approach (because she was part of no group) and saw this as a form of scientific analysis and not a “defence” of women artists’ position in the contemporary art world (DALLIER-POPPER, 2009, p. 19-20)⁶. Her focus was also not exclusively on art and sexuality/or questions of the body, as she felt it was for her colleague Catherine Millet, one of her thematic essays, for example, was “Soft Art” (1974). She was well aware of the “fear of feminism” in France, that she wrote about in Nemser’s *Feminist Art Journal* (DALLIER, 1975) and the problems of art criticism on both sides of the Atlantic (DALLIER-POPPER, 1979). In an interview, she also outlined the work of her female peers since the 1970s – Catherine Millet, Anne Tronche, Catherine Francblin, Anne Dagbert, Christine Frerot and Elisabeth Lebovici–, alongside a rather critical view of her own life as secretary/editor to both her two husbands, first, art critic Pierre Restany and then, sociologist Frank Popper, comparing the support and encouragement they, in return, gave her (DALLIER-POPPER, 2009, p. 8). In the

6 ‘Mon travail consiste à mieux faire connaître leurs oeuvres et à montrer comment elles s’insèrent dans l’histoire de de l’art contemporain. Je me suis également attachée à déceler l’incidence qu’a pu avoir le féminisme-doctrine ou le féminisme-movement sur less oeuvres de certaines artistes femmes, ce qui représente un travail de recherche et d’analyse. Les varies militantes auraient tendance à me reprocher de faire un travail de type scientifique (socio-esthétique) à partir des artistes femme que j’aurais prises, dissent-elles, comme “objets d’étude” et dont j’aurais profité pour faire ma “carrière” (DALLIER-POPPER, 2009, p. 19-20).

circle around Pierre Restany, Dallier's partner in the 1950s, there had been less women than men but they were still present: Ania Staritsky, Hella Guth, Lutka Pink, Huguette Arthus-Bertrand, Marie Raymond (DALLIER-POPPER, 2009, p. 15); women formed around one third of the professional association of art critics, International Art Critics Association (AICA) in France in later years. These patterns are not untypical in the national sections of AICA (which grew from 30-70 countries over these years), where women art critics were/are present and influential in mainstream art magazines (as critics, editors and publishers) and frequently elected Presidents. There have only been a few women international Presidents, for example, Kim Levin and Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves. Whether or not as women critics they paid attention to feminist debates is another matter but there are experts on this subject amongst AICA members globally and not just in France (LEBOVICI and GONNARD, 2007).

There are thematic subjects in feminist art criticism and how they treat the women artists who become the subject in what they write. The reification of authorship has not given way, as envisaged in the death of the author to a renewed attention to the birth of the reader (BARTHES, 1977). There are subjects, we might more properly call them "objects", in how these topics and themes that are tackled – and how the object (an artwork, an exhibition, a project of an artist) is framed and considered. Sometimes, women art critics reproduce, even repeat, well-known methods of approaching these objects in different texts, as the examples above indicate. Sometimes the objects/subjects they consider co-create or re-make their subjects and a different kind of art criticism emerges in the process of these encounters as an experiment. This is why a history of themes in feminist art criticism could become more than the fetishised single encounter in the reflections of one critic and one artist or artwork – as naming a movement – the accompanying declaration of originality, genius or feminism, found there. While the association of feminist art criticism is frequently stated as about "the body" (when it is women's bodies that are in question) or changing the representation of "women-as-subjects" in art, questions of (women's) sexuality and representation of the feminine remain important. A history of feminist art criticism could reside in a list of definitive essays on a theme discussed for the first time (from violence against women/rape, menstruation, ecology, irony, postmodernism, lesbian art, food or anything pink!). Mira Schor in "Patrilineage" (1991) argued that another way feminism set out to change the value system would be to move away from references to only other male artists, and to compare women to each other. Feminist art criticism also has tried since the 1970s to demolish the endless references to the feminine stereotype, by which a woman artist's work is judged for her sex, over and above her art, only to see it repeatedly reinstated in different generations.

Thematic essays are, by contrast, where ambitious frameworks are offered as art theoretical propositions on women artists' practices are discussed, but this is more than simply naming the latest trends and tendencies in contemporary art. There are frames, borders, limits and particular approaches that are rehearsed, considered, challenged, critiqued and modified in feminist art criticism, like any other form of criticism, but these are not about policing what is or is not considered feminist or art. Many boundary changes occur in art criticism in general: in explorations of

what is modernism, postmodernism, contemporaneity, the global contemporary, ideas of what art is and who are the key artists whose work exemplifies a movement or tendency. Borders divide and categorise different types of work between, for example, performance art, issue-based work, social art practice and activist art; different conceptions of both art and politics, the attention given to world histories, colonialisms or indigeneity. Distinctions are drawn on how sexism, racism, homophobia, ethnic and class divisions in personal and public life of artists and their experiences of these are “referenced” in artworks or artists’ lives. The invisibility of feminist debates on race and class (which has a 50 year history) chimes beautifully with the general public negativity about “white feminism” in much popular culture in Europe or the embrace of queer theory post-1990 or identity-based forms of intersectional feminisms as somehow innately more “progressive” in the 2010s. The invention of a new way of looking does not rest on adding a distinct and additional identity for feminism to be transformed into a “different” kind of feminism: queer, trans-, black, lesbian, activist, intersectional or any form of ethnic, regional, or nationalist identification (FRUEH; LANGER and RAVEN, 1992; SCHOR et al. , 1999), it is about changing how we see both the world and art’s place within it. Thematic essays are also about where debates with aesthetics and philosophy enter into art’s discourse: for example, concepts of beauty, ideas about space, pregnancy, sex, truth, care and ethics are rehearsed (BRAND, 2006). How the ‘memory’ of these debates from the 1970s – their legacy – is remembered across generations and in different countries is also the concern of many thematic essays: Pollock (2014), Schor (2009) or Jones (1999).

WOMEN’S ART/FEMINIST ART JOURNALS

Very few histories exist of feminist art journals, their significance is mentioned in passing in many accounts of the women’s art movement (BROUDE and GARRARD, 1994), but comparative analyses between journals as a means of representing specific art world constituencies or editorial policy are very rare. Isolated articles from feminist art journals and from other publications are frequently republished in the over 300 anthologies of feminist articles,⁷ aiming to explain the feminist movement or feminisms relation to art/culture. Some of these anthologies are drawn only from one magazine: ie M/E/A/N/I/N/G/S (2000) or LIP (2013) or MAKE (2015). Beata Hock, citing Beatrice Joyeux-Prunell’s collation of 305 modernist magazines in the period 1917-1940, refers to how “running a magazine indicated an artist group’s aspiration to be recognised as part of the international avantgarde” (HOCK, 2018). In her view, journals manifested a “will to cosmopolitanism” and examining these journals’ policies were a means to assess the relevance of this claim in terms of approach and objects of study. Any examination of what a journal or art magazine does is visible through their decisions about what gets published, and analysis of this is more than a policy, as it establishes a particular theoretical or intellectual set of

⁷ See KT Press, Anthologies (n. d.).

positions. In terms of tracing the networks of influence and the presence of different constituencies in the artworld – and their avant-garde gambits – the importance of these journals cannot be overstated.

Analysing the 60+ feminist art journals could be the basis for a different kind of art history of feminist art and art criticism – and its gambits – and not just another way of generating fans (GRANT, 2022), subscribers (MUSAWWIR, 2010) or followers of feminist art (ROM, 1982). There was an international women's art movement, not simply nation-based ones and many local groups were quick to search out and encourage national/international exchanges through these journals. The contrast between *Feminist Art Journal* (1972-1977) and *Heresies* (1977-1993), which were not published simultaneously but successively, is also between a commercial art world focus and an alternative collective-activist feminism. The presence of an active women's art movement can be found in the publications which arose from the many feminist art institutions/ registries and art libraries founded in the late 1970s/1980s, e. g. from Women's Art Resource Centre in Toronto, *Matriart: A Canadian Feminist Art Journal* (Canada) 1990-1998, or *Women's Art Register Bulletin* (1988-1995) from Women's Art Register, Australia. Their publications began as newsletters to members but went far beyond any reflection simply on the groups' activities to become nationally distributed art journals, e. g. *Women Artists Slide Library Journal* (UK) (1985-1990), which became *Women's Art Magazine*, (1990-1996), then (*Make*, 1996-2002) or *Ruimte* (The Netherlands) (1984-1996) produced by 'SVBK' | Stichting Vrouwen in de Beeldende Kunst, Amsterdam. In the 2000s, there was a marked return to the avantgarde tradition of small-scale print publishing by modernist artists' groups and newly-formed collectives – and just like them, these initiatives have been short-lived, few have lasted beyond 10 issues, e. g. *L. T. T. R* (USA, 2002-2008), *Petunia* (France, 2008-2014), *We are Orlando* (UK, 2014-2018), *Salt* (UK, 2012-2019), *Ms. Use* (Israel, 2009). This approach to feminist/women's art magazine/journal-making has not expanded into a worldwide phenomenon from nation-based collectives, in spite of the popularity of zines, and the ease of low-cost digital publishing. Contrasting the articles published in US's feminist art history journal, *Women's Art Journal* (USA) with the journal *Frauen Kunst Wissenschaft* (Germany) would give us insight into the differences between how feminist art history is developing on both sides of the Atlantic, as well as their editorial policies. Feminist art magazines that reported on the debates and activities of the women's art movement in *Women Artists' News* (1975-1998) in the US or *MAKE* in the UK (1985-2002) could indicate the range of approaches to feminist activities and events and ways of profiling women artists. The years of publication for *Heresies* (1977-1996) overlapped with Australian journal, *LIP* (1976-1984) and the USA journal, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* (1986-1996), produced by Mira Schor and Susan Bee, each providing models of different forms of theoretical and artist-led discourses on feminism and feminist theory. In these journals, the debates about essentialism versus anti-essentialism which dominated academic feminisms in the late 1980s-1990s are very present as is another important theme of activism in the women's art movement. The impact of these debates were not pro-theory or anti-theory but about the methods and means to understand women artists' works in new ways which responded to the complexity of women's evolving multi-media

and installation practices, evident in work of the period. One of the problems of feminist art history/criticism has been its framing in nation-based accounts because in these there are very few countries which have supported more than one magazine or journal, it is only in a transnational or “global contemporary art” analysis that this model gains importance. Feminism (in academia) has approached women’s history instead in largely generational terms and feminist art history and criticism (and artists in their practice) have also used these models to frame understandings of how we should look again at women artists’ works and histories cross-generationally, but these attempts are linked largely to only national or local art scenes. While there have been area-studies models adopted looking at regions in the world or as a model to frame the global (e. g. Latin American or Asian), very few accounts have used this to draw attention to the global dimensions of feminisms. The phrase “the West and the rest” is apt for many international projects in terms of representation of nation states which offer understandings about feminisms. Multi-cultural attempts at representation have not overcome this problem, as concepts of diversity vary hugely from country to country, if one pays attention to demographics. Less common have been the discussions about underlying international exchanges between women (across continents or countries) or how knowledge about different models of production (for exhibitions, publications and arts organisations) have framed how women artists in one locality have then decided to organise or work to produce feminist art histories, exhibitions or publications which themselves have tried to gain international reach and recognition. A network-based and transnational exchange view of feminism has all-too-often only been seen as “learning from the West” or “learning from USA” when in fact the dynamics of these local/global exchanges within feminisms are much more complex and multi-layered.

n. paradoxa: international feminist art journal started in 1998, as an independent journal under one editor, when there were 8 other women’s art magazines still in print around the world, and as the shift from paper to digital was well underway (DEEPWELL, 2017). Across its 40 volumes (1998-2017) in print, it published 500+ articles by or about, 400+ artists and writers living and working in 80+ countries. The policy of the journal was in each issue to have articles from as many different countries and parts of the world as possible, and to explore one theme from very different angles. The other policy was not to publish two articles on the same artist or the same body of works, to create a rolling and expansive programme. The plurality of ideas about feminisms – across language groups and continents – presents many complex, and sometimes contradictory, positions – and this “democratic” and mixed economy in feminism cannot simply be thought as divided into countries or different sub-cultures or use of media (categories most commonly used in art history). It was the aim of the journal to foster through juxtaposition and comparative analysis, transgenerational and transnational dialogues on a wide range of issues and in a rolling and constantly changing programme. There have been attempts to map contemporary frameworks of feminist art criticism transnationally (DEEPWELL, 2020b and 2023; KUKAINE, 2023). As Janet Wolff suggested, after a politics of correction (i. e. a critique of absences, sexism, patriarchal attitudes), it is necessary to move to a politics of interrogation and a new kind of consideration of a local/

global dynamic in the politics of exchanges between feminism and the art world (PACHMANOVÁ, 2006). This has only just begun to seem viable and achievable and will need decolonial, postcolonial, queer and anti-racist thought at the centre of feminism to further its activities.

In terms of book production, particularly, anthologies of feminist art criticism, it is now possible to recognise continuities in feminist activities from different regions of the world, over and above the histories of independent art magazines, as not just one volume per decade is published but many.⁸ The questions about legacies and “firsts” remain to be interrogated as well as a better and more complex picture of transmission and exchange of models. New scholarship on Carla Lonzi, for example, has pointed to how feminism transformed her writing in 1970, moving her away from an art criticism of dialogue, encounter and conversation to political activism (VENTRELLA and ZAPPERI, 2022). Her critic/curator peers, Romana Loda (MASOERO, 2020), Anne Marie Sauzeau-Boetti (1976) and Mirella Bentivoglio (POHL, 1985) each found a different basis for feminist writing and organisation of exhibitions for women artists in the early 1970s, emphasising minimalism, abstraction/conceptualism and women’s subjectivity. Or one could consider the emergence of Monica Mayer’s critical practice in Mexico after 1975 in relation to her commitment to public teaching and performances, as well as her decision to travel to the US to join Chicago’s feminist art class (MAYER, 2001; GIUNTA, 2013).

Even though I have stressed different relations to the legacy of the 1970s, if we don’t pay attention to different frameworks through which to understand 50 years of feminist art criticism, we will return again only to the fetishization of the early 1970s as a few pioneers and disregard what happened since, as my criticism of Demori/Nochlin makes clear. ‘Not reading’/ ‘not teaching’ feminist art criticism or art histories of women artists in Europe (East and West) or Asia, as much as in Africa, Middle East or South America, requires yet again a necessary correction to the general devaluation of women’s contributions to culture. While there are courses on women artists, there are no courses in feminist art criticism, only occasional seminars; a fate currently shared by feminist art history. Feminist art criticism appears in women’s studies more frequently when it is explored as a therapeutic practice or in profiles of local artists, prioritised because of access to a woman’s oral history, and produced as a total review of their life and work (as an example of this, see Norway’s feminist art journal, *NORA*). This marginalisation academically is reproduced by citation practices where women critics, curators, and artists’ who produce feminist work are simply not discussed. The failure of many professional art critics to integrate any feminist analyses into any history of art criticism (under the lame excuse, it’s not fashionable anymore!) will also mean that the history of art as well as art criticism will potentially reproduce again categories and ideas which repeat the same gender-based stereotypes and partial views that feminists have been contesting for 50 years and the debate will remain static. The proposals in this essay to think about interviews, thematic essays and feminist art journals are to

8 See KT Press, *Anthologies* (n. d.).

expand the range of references and possibilities for how we discuss what feminist art criticism is and where and how it is published and its ideas put into circulation.

SOBRE A AUTORA

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