

Feminist Curating as Curatorial Activism: A Roundtable

Ann Sutherland Harris, Daria Khan, Rosa Martínez, Camille Morineau, Maura Reilly, Catherine de Zegher
ON CURATING (Fall 2021)

“Curatorial Activism” is a term Maura Reilly coined over a decade ago and extrapolated upon in great detail in her 2018 book, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*. The book celebrates contemporary curatorial strategies that provide productive and, at times, transformative alternatives to exclusionary, mainstream curatorial strategies that continue to reproduce inequality in their almost-exclusive focus of white, western cis-male artists. Curatorial activists, then, are curators who organize art exhibitions with the principle aim of ensuring that large constituencies of artists, who have been historically silenced or omitted altogether, are no longer excluded from the master narratives of art—as such, they focus almost exclusively on work produced by women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and/or queer artists. What follows is a conversation with six curatorial activists—most of whom have dedicated themselves almost entirely to the feminist cause—and all of whom have organized groundbreaking feminist art exhibitions. We explore the dual projects of feminist curating—either curating works of feminist or women’s art or curating from a feminist perspective (or both). Both of these projects are extremely necessary. We discuss the many obstacles and challenges we have faced as feminist curators; we contemplate the impact we may have had on the field of art, the recurring backlashes related to the feminist cause, our relationships to the issue of race, the need for continued feminist solidarity characterized by generosity not backstabbing, the past and future of feminist curating, strategic essentialism, and the structural changes needed at an institutional level before progress can truly be made.

This roundtable discussion took place on January 7, 2021 following a panel organized by Maura Reilly and sponsored by *The Brooklyn Rail* as part of their “Common Ground” series. The link to the panel and discussion can be found here:

<https://brooklynrail.org/events/2021/01/07/curatorial-activism-part-2/>

Rosa Martínez (RM): I wanted to ask to each of you if you’ve faced any major difficulties in organizing feminist art exhibitions?

Maura Reilly (MR): I would imagine a common link for all of us is the patriarchal resistance to feminism, in general.

Camille Morineau (CM): For me, organizing feminist art exhibitions has taken more time, more money, and more effort in order to properly show the works of women artists, simply because there’s not enough information, especially prior to contemporary art. This is precisely why I co-founded AWARE (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions), which is a non-profit organization dedicated to the history of women artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, from all over the world. We have more than 700 biographies, researched and illustrated, available in French and English on our website. There is also a lot of “non-academic” content designed to enable us to reach out to children, teachers, or anyone interested in writing an alternate history; 45,000 visitors per month explore the content on

AWARE, from across the globe. We have recently expanded our research to women artists from Africa and the Asia Pacific and have been publishing that content as well.

MR: Ann, you and I had conversations about the difficulty of and challenges with mounting *Women Artists*¹—how you had to locate long-forgotten paintings in the storage units of museums. Some of these women artists had been entirely overlooked by curators at these museums. What was the main obstacle for you?

Ann Sutherland Harris (ASH): It was difficult. Collecting the basic information took a year. My teaching assistant Stephanie Barron went through Thieme-Becker—these two German scholars, Ulrich Thieme and Felix Becker, were the first to make a complete dictionary of all the artists then known; they included a few women. That was a start. Giorgio Vasari’s biographies mention Sofonisba Anguissola, and Carlo Malvasia had crucial information about Elisabetta Sirani. As Linda Nochlin described it, we were “starting from scratch.” As for the tour, I think it was significant that we couldn’t get the Art Institute of Chicago or the Cleveland Art Museum to take it, and the Metropolitan Museum turned it down, too, but the Brooklyn Museum was delighted to host it.

Catherine de Zegher (CdZ): Most of the work by women artists is in museum storage. When I became the director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent, Belgium, I could hardly find a work by a woman artist on the wall. I tried to take out as many artworks as possible from storage. When I initiated an exhibition in 2018 of women artists from the Baroque, with Artemisia Gentileschi amongst them, I remember vividly how, when I left the museum and retired, one of the curators said behind my back: “Now we are finished with feminist readings of artworks and exhibitions.”² It was very disappointing. Although I suppose it makes sense, since I was the first woman director of that museum in 200 years. In this context, I wonder if you still all feel that your feminist activist curating has made an impact in the field or even in society at large?

MR: I hope that my curatorial practice has made an impact. While my 2007 exhibition *Global Feminisms*³ received mixed reviews at the time, I’ve had countless younger feminist curators express to me how important that exhibition is to their practice. The exhibition was the first truly intersectional and transnational feminist art exhibition at a major museum. *WACK!*,⁴ which opened in the same year, had a handful of international artists, but was primarily an exhibition of white feminist artists. *Global Feminisms* was the reverse: there were many more non-Western women artists than there were those from the Global North. The younger generation seems to have appreciated this more than the critics of the exhibition at the time, some of whom complained about a lack of male artists (hello?) and the in-your-face feminist content (again, hello?). The younger generation has been far more generous and compassionate in contemplating the exhibition’s inadequacies, along with its strengths, preferring to focus on its historical import and its emphasis on BIPOC feminist artists. I think, above all, my role as Founding Curator at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum has been the most impactful on this generation, and generations to come. The Center is an unprecedented museum space, and I hope that the many ways in which I shaped its founding—from its overarching conceptual framework, the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, and the many exhibitions I curated therein—will be influential well into the future. I’d like to think that my other curatorial projects have been influential as well. I’m particularly proud of an exhibition I organized in 2009 of Carolee

Schneemann's paintings—the first time they'd been exhibited in almost forty years. I even reconstructed her *Four Fur Cutting Boards* (1963), the huge sculpture in front of which she photographed *Eye Body*, which had been languishing in her storage for decades. Before her death, Carolee told me that that exhibition and my re-discovery of her paintings was a game-changer for her career, and the sale of those works transformed her market value at a time when she was struggling financially. Before that time, no one had bothered to look at her paintings, including her dealers, as important components of her decades-long practice. She had become somewhat pigeonholed as a performance artist, while other dimensions of her complex oeuvre were overshadowed by certain canonical works. Her next retrospective at PS1, curated by Sabine Breitwieser, included a large sampling of the exact same paintings that I'd chosen for my exhibition (including the *Four Fur Cutting Boards* that I'd reconstructed). Shockingly, Sabine did not acknowledge my exhibition, nor did she even include me in a footnote in the catalogue, much to my and Carolee's surprise. A prime example of women not supporting or recognizing other women. Nevertheless, it was incredibly heartening to me that my exhibition had had such a financial and conceptual impact on Carolee's practice. I also think the queer art and Indigenous Australian art exhibitions that I've organized have pushed the conversation about contemporary art in provocative, and I hope impactful, ways.

CM: I feel that my exhibitions have had impact, each of them differently according to their opening date. *elles@centrepompidou* was presented in 2009 when the word "feminist" was still taboo in France, although many feminist exhibitions had taken place. So, my fight was mostly to explain why showing 300 female artists from the permanent collection, instead of mostly male (90% until then) artists, was in itself an activist demonstration. I wanted to demonstrate that women could write the history of 20th century art as strongly as men. But I was often attacked for "ghettoizing" women artists. A few years later, the Niki de Saint Phalle retrospective (2014) at the Pompidou Centre was already easier to explain: she was a famous artist, but her feminism had simply been forgotten. By this point the word "feminist" was easier to use, and Saint Phalle made it so easy for me: she was just so clear and strong about it! Then in 2016, the exhibition *Women House*⁵ that I organized opened at Monnaie in Paris, a collective thematic show exploring how women artists had been representing domesticity, and architecture, for a century, a few months after *L'autre continent*, a group show about African women artists at the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle in Le Havre. By then, it was clear in France that something important had been missing in the canon of art history, but each show was important for different reasons. African contemporary art had been mainly represented by men, for one thing, and, most importantly, "#MeToo" happened during the run of *Women House*, so a wave of people came to see it twice, with a new perspective.

ASH: *Women Artists 1550-1950* has had and continues to have influence. Some of the works in the exhibition that were in private hands are now in major American museums. Artemisia Gentileschi has had at least six major exhibitions in Europe, including one that just closed at London's National Gallery after they acquired a small but very expensive work by her. Other women in the show have had exhibitions devoted to them alone, including a wonderful one on Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun at the Met.

RM: I believe the exhibitions I've curated have had a real impact in the cities where they were presented. I am sure of that because, after each biennial I directed, after every series of

exhibitions I curated in different institutions, I was commissioned to create new events in very distant parts of the world. And my feminist agenda was always clear and politically robust. Maybe the effects of those exhibitions have dissolved through the years in the flow of the many events and the proliferations of biennials all over the planet. But I feel in my generation women curators were real pioneers, opening new ways of thinking and new ways of giving shape to a feminist and feminine way of creating emotions, pleasure, discourses, and critical thought. In that sense, the care of the grammar of the exhibitions is essential to define a new way of doing. I was very lucky to be learning through practicing, as in fact I never studied to become a curator. It was more a kind of destiny that took shape, first in the Barcelona Biennial (1988-1991) and then in the series of exhibitions I curated for the experimental space Sala Montcada of La Caixa Foundation in 1992, where I included artists like Nan Goldin and Jana Sterbak. And this was something relevant in Spain at that moment. I then continued with collective curated projects like the first Manifesta, or the 5th International Istanbul Biennial in 1997 that I curated alone and that was a landmark in the history of this event, and also in my personal and professional life. I enjoyed having so much freedom to select the artists and to give them the chance of working in historical and public spaces of the incredible city of Istanbul. Apart from the exhibit I created in the Arsenale for the Venice Biennale of 2005, if I had to point out an exhibition that really changed the vision and the understanding of curating in the third millennium, it is the one I organized for the 500th anniversary of the birth of Saint Teresa of Avila in 2015. To update the spiritual and existential legacy of that astounding woman in connection with the Baroque sculptures of the National Museum of Sculpture in Valladolid—and with the carefully selected works of contemporary artists like Cristina Lucas, Pilar Albarracín, Marina Abramovic and Louise Bourgeois—gave me the chance to create unique connections and echoes between past, present, and future.

CdZ: Twenty-five years ago, I curated the exhibition *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston. The word “elliptical” in the title means oval, egg-shaped, looped, serpentine, eccentric, or off-center. Maybe the almost-immediate recognition of the exhibition came because it happened at a tipping point, or maybe in some ways the exhibition itself precipitated what was to follow by attracting to it, and around it, ideas and arguments that were bubbling just under the surface. It was an opening onto a present only just being acknowledged, it was in a beautiful sense pregnant with an irresistible becoming: a feminine principle. Sometimes, not often but sometimes, it is like this, when currents of thought in the world connect far beyond what you are aware of as you work and prepare. This was its immanence and its difference. This winter, in the anniversary edition of the Dutch art magazine *See All This*, I was asked to revisit the exhibition and its impact. I pointed out that, indeed, again and again, in times of upheaval like today, the work of women artists can be seen to lead the way in their apparent attempts to formulate more inclusive and empathic models of coexistence in a 21st century society—a society that is tending to be increasingly manipulative, deceptive, intolerant, and violent. In women’s precarious art, however, we often discover a sense of consciousness, collaboration, and constructive criticism informed by a desire for beauty, fragility, compassion, and hope. Rather than on negativity and separation, women’s day-to-day work is predicated on sharing and love— notions from which these

artists don't shy away. Many promote a kind of humanism and anti-fascism to counteract the worst irrational sentiments of humankind: resentment, arrogance, xenophobia, greed, lust for power, and fear itself. Daring and caring, these women artists are for me amazons battling the sham-culture of our age and calling for resistance, for the capacity to transcend ourselves, and, I so strongly believe, to rewild our planet. Whenever similar crises occurred in the 20th century, with every new generation, women artists stood up and worked at the forefront, while different times demanded different resolutions. It is the work, thoughtfulness, and brilliance of individual women in shared purpose that has made an impact. It is the consequence of a lifetime's struggle of extraordinary people, not only artists and curators, but also, and I want to say this from a lifetime's experience of working to make things happen, because it is often overlooked and misunderstood, funders and patrons, like Barbara Lee, who, inspired by *Inside the Visible*, started to collect women artists and to support women politicians in the US to remarkable effect.

Daria Khan (DK): I definitely feel the impact of working in London versus working somewhere else. For instance, when I organized an exhibition which included Tejal Shah's overtly queer feminist work in Russia in 2013—where we showed *Between the Waves* as part of the exhibition dedicated to Sergei Paradjanov's legacy—the hosting institution actually wanted to remove the work just before the opening because they didn't watch the videos until the very last minute and eventually found them too disturbing for the public. The work remained on view and became a very powerful statement in the context of the newly adopted gay propaganda law. In London, however, I haven't experienced any difficulties and I've felt that my work at the non-profit art institution Mimosa House, which I founded in 2018, has been really appreciated overall. I acknowledge that that's thanks to all the work that has been done before me by you all, and others. I'm quite aware, though, that what we do is experienced by a very small percentage of the public. I think it's a very gradual and persistent process of establishing our relationships with communities and reaching out to people and asking what people want to see and experience, involving them in the process of artistic programming. That's how we can be truly impactful.

MR: You raise an interesting point, Daria. I worry our work is simply preaching to the converted, that those who attend our shows are already mindful of the feminist cause. Are we managing to get people that are uninterested in the feminist cause to come to our exhibitions? That was one of the issues that we discussed when founding the Sackler Center. As we set out to locate a space within the museum for the new Center, we felt it was important to choose a spot where visitors have to transverse the Center in order to get from one wing to another. In other words, we forced those who are uninterested in feminism to walk through the feminist center. Do you all worry about your audiences in this way?

CM: Yes, I think it's a very important point. I believe if we are to change the public's perception of feminism, we need a wider audience. We need to engage young people—children, students all ages—and to give teachers the tools to present the materials and develop knowledge. So, I co-founded with Maura, a program called TEAM, which is associated with AWARE, where fifteen academics from all over the world, all specialists in women artists, work with five students each to write either a biography or a research paper on one or more women artists. I believe that the knowledge must flow from one generation to the next, and on, and on. AWARE also conducts special programs for children—short

animation films with straightforward texts catered to those who are not specialists of art history.

MR: The importance of educational initiatives in/around our exhibitions cannot be underestimated. That was definitely a concern vis-à-vis *The Dinner Party* for which we wrote easily digestible—dare I say “non-threatening”—texts to address the gynophobia the work induces in mainstream audiences. Rosa, I’m sure you contemplated this issue of “preaching to the converted” when you organized the 2005 Venice Biennale with María da Corral.

RM: Yes, I did. But I also knew that it was a wonderful chance to convert the incredulous, so I think the opportunity to put feminist art front and center was not missed. Just as you entered the Arsenale, visitors saw the big chandelier work titled *A Noiva (The Bride)* by Joana Vasconcelos, which is an incredible lamp six meters high made out of shiny tampons that in the context of Venice looked like a giant Murano lamp. This sculpture was surrounded by posters specifically created for the occasion by the Guerrilla Girls who gathered shocking statistics about the presence, or lack thereof, of women in the different Venice Biennales. María and I were very conscious that we were the first female curators to organize the Biennale in its 51st edition in 2005 and that this granted us a wonderful platform to showcase a large sampling of important work by women artists. It has to be taken into account that the percentage of women artists in the first Biennale in 1895 was 2.4 %. The percentage of artists a century later in 1995 was 9%. So, the numbers speak clearly. In our Biennale in 2005, more than 60% were female artists, which I think is a good ratio to compensate for the “much macho biennales” of 1978, 1986, 1988, or 1995, where more than 90% of artists were men, as the Guerrilla Girls pointed out.

ASH: I have an idea. What if one curated an exhibition along a particular theme but did not identify the sex of the artists to see what kind of response you’d get from the audience? It might be interesting to do that.

RM: Well, this was done in the amazing series of exhibitions presented during the Biennales from 2007 to 2017 at the Palazzo Fortuny in Venice. Organized by the Axel Vervoordt Foundation, these series were part of a unique interaction between the architecture of the Palazzo, the legacy of Mariano Fortuny, and the desire to dissolve the frontiers that separate aesthetic categories, anthropological cultures, historical chronologies, and also gender. I was lucky to be part of the curatorial team that organized the exhibition *TRA. Edge of Becoming* in 2011. There were no labels; no names were inscribed besides the works. The visitor was invited to do a “parcours” where the formal connections and the beauty of the path were the only meaningful ways of approaching the experience without calling attention to the sex, the age, or the country of the artist. However, I have to say that the majority of the participants were men, as this was a tradition at the Vervoordt Foundation. But amazing women were included for my exhibition, *TRA*. I also have to say that some female artists did not want to participate as they requested to have the same size of space as some of the male artists. So, this was part of the struggle...

MR: I’m curious about the multifarious and individualized definitions of feminism that we witness in feminist curation. Camille, you discuss your curatorial approach to *Elles* in your catalogue essay. You state that your aim is not to define feminism, nor the exhibition’s relationship to feminism, nor your own personal relationship to feminism. Was there a reason

for not wanting to call the show a “feminist” project—I suppose I’m thinking here of the public-facing interpretative materials, wall text, and so on?

CM: Until recently (I would say, roughly ten years), very few French women granted themselves the right to use the word “feminist,” and lashed out at anyone using it without their permission. That’s one of the reasons I didn’t use it to promote *Elles*, and even then, I was harshly criticized by some feminists for “ghettoizing women.” There is a second reason: at the time the word frightened men and non-feminist women, too, so I just had to move swiftly and stealthily, to organize what was indeed a feminist gesture, by promoting it as an art historian researching an under-recognized subject. It was really both, but better to use a neutral approach, and let the public reach their own opinion. Over 2.5 million people visited the exhibition—men, women, children, many of whom came back repeatedly. The exhibition showed them that women had played a huge part in the avant-garde. It was very simple and straightforward, in the end.

MR: I believed *Elles* embodied a feminist methodological approach to curating without question. I’m a firm believer in the concept of feminisms in the plural, hence my exhibition curated with Linda Nochlin, *Global Feminisms*. I think it’s really fascinating how people have these very specific definitions of feminism and if the curated shows that we organize do not match *their* definition, they question whether our shows are “feminist” enough. This has happened I think to all of us, and sadly that criticism, more often than not, comes from other women. If we use the term feminisms, always in the plural, it allows for our subjective, personalized definitions. We should be supportive and generous about that. Most of us have dealt with this, as Camille discussed—as, for instance, Germaine Greer’s scathing criticism of *Elles*. I’m thinking also about Catherine’s *Inside the Visible*, which received mixed critical reception. While many critics raved about the show, others were highly critical of the use of “feminine” in the exhibition’s title and insisted the show wasn’t “feminist.” Some criticized its women-only focus itself as essentialist, asking “what brings together such disparate artists across time and space other than an assumption that they are joined by their ‘women’s experience’?”⁶ Some complained that the show and catalogue were problematic in their failure to clarify the project’s oblique relationship to a more explicitly stated or activist feminism, and to specific histories of feminist art. Some were upset, Catherine, that you’d avoided the term feminism by substituting it for the “feminine.” I disagree. To me, the women artists in the show were demonstrated to have developed positions of general resistance in relationship to other dominant themes in the 20th century: dictatorship in Latin America, fascism in Europe, racism in America. And, so you posited the word “feminine” in the exhibition’s full title as a force of resistance, not as an essence. How have you responded to those critics who claim the exhibition is not feminist?

CdZ: When I speak to a feminine principle, I do not apologize for it. From the experience of my lifetime, how can I not speak for inclusion, tolerance, and respect? I do not speak against women who have taken other paths, or who hold to other beliefs drawn from their experience, or other notions of feminism. I know how overwhelming it can feel just to speak out and to give place to the voices of others who were silenced. As you say, feminism is not, and never has been, a monolithic movement: alongside the feminisms of the Anglo-Saxon world, there was, for example, the French feminist movement of the 1970s by which I was very inspired. Hélène Cixous first coined the term *écriture féminine* (‘feminine writing’) in her essay, *The*

Laugh of the Medusa (1975)—and this seems to me to address what we are coming to here—she asserts that, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies,” because their sexual pleasure has been repressed and denied expression. Some women philosophers, psychoanalysts, and art historians—such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Griselda Pollock, Geeta Kapur, Jean Fisher—and artists like Lygia Clark, Nancy Spero, Anna Maria Maiolino, Bracha Ettinger, Everlyn Nicodemus, Cecilia Vicuña, and Erin Manning have tried to formulate a new textual and visual language to convey how humans come to understand their social roles. More recently, Judith Butler characterized feminism as a vision of solidarity, as a universal emancipatory movement. In this context, we can acknowledge (eco)feminism as a coalitional practice, as a movement that enables to see what was (or is) eclipsed: that which is unaligned with the conventions of the moment, or which needs different conditions of perceptibility... We see ourselves, I believe, as both speaking for feminism—and remember that, for artists with complex histories, who may have been marginalized at many different levels, feminism is just one part of their concerns—and as sharing in senses and meanings that could be described as having a feminine principle in terms of politics and world view. I don’t say this in an essentialist way, and I don’t try to determine whether it is shaped by culture, biology, or nature—in our lifetime, when we are still dealing with the effects, the immediate, pressing effects and the real jeopardy we face, the origin hardly matters. The fact is that we can reasonably understand an energy that has qualities of compassion, caring, and healing as lying within the feminine. Like those women who lived and worked on the margins but were everywhere present and unacknowledged, the feminine has been everywhere disallowed, diminished, and overshadowed, but is everywhere our best hope.

CM: I think that there are many kinds of feminisms. We need to acknowledge the fact that there are as many feminisms as there are feminists. Each one of us has a personal definition of what feminism is and we should be able to discuss that, to share that, and to still be a unified group.

MR: I like that, Camille. Linda Nochlin told me once that feminists are feminists’ worst enemies. I have certainly experienced that first-hand, as noted earlier. I’d like to make a proclamation that we stop this. We have a shared, common interest. Yes, it might be essentialist to present all-women exhibitions, but until women artists have a far stronger foothold in the system and have achieved equality in representation, it is important that we preserve these exhibitions, spaces, curatorial positions, including labels such as “black,” “woman,” or “queer,” even though we may recognize that they are inherently essentialist, ghettoizing, exclusionary, and universalizing, and fail to account for important differences between and among artists’ lived experiences. Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism,” as outlined in her book *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1987), is particularly useful in this context. For Spivak, groups may act temporarily “as if” their identities are stable in an effort to create solidarity, a sense of belonging and identity to a group, race, or ethnicity, for the purposes of social or political action. For instance, strategic essentialism might involve the bringing together of diverse agendas of various women’s groups to work for a common cause, such as abortion rights or domestic violence. The Women’s March on Washington in 2017, initiated by the uproar concerning Donald Trump’s

election as president of the USA, was a particularly powerful example of strategic essentialism: a million people—of every gender, ethnicity, and religion—came together as “women” protesting. Their causes and concerns were not identical by any means, but they united under an “essentialist” identity, that of women. So, in strategic essentialism, the “essential attributes” are acknowledged to be a construct—that is, the (political) group, somewhat paradoxically, acknowledges that the attributes (black, queer, woman, for example) are not intrinsically essential, but are invoked if they are considered to be strategically and politically useful. Moreover, members of the group maintain the power to decide when the attributes are “essential” and when they are not. In this way, strategic essentialism can be a potent political tool. While one could argue that all-women shows are ghettoizing or separatist, as with all identity-based exhibitions, there are benefits as well. Such exhibitions function as curatorial correctives and offer visibility to artists who have been marginalized. Yet, there is always the continued issue of intersectionality, which leads me to the question of race in relation to feminist curatorial projects. In putting together this panel, I was really conscious of the fact that the curators who have organized the landmark exhibitions over the last fifty years have been white feminists with very few exceptions. And, I think this has to do obviously with the fact that, until recently, white, not BIPOC, women were in the positions of power to organize these exhibitions. Fortunately, now we have institutions who are hiring black and POC curators, but only recently. So, while sexism is clearly an issue, so is the continued racism. How do we grapple with this as feminists? How does race figure into your curatorial processes? Have any of you thought about that when you’re curating exhibitions?

CM: I have. In 2016, I curated a show about African women artists at Musée d’Histoire Naturelle in Le Havre.⁷ When I was working at the Centre Pompidou, it was clear that there were very little, if no, black women artists in the collection. There’s also an enormous lack of information about African women artists that we have to address, as well as African-American, Indigenous, and other marginalized women artists. I believe firmly that there needs to be more scholarship and critical attention paid to black women artists. Without this information, there is no visibility.

RM: I have been working for many years in biennials, which are these transcultural events that exhibit artists from all over the world, so I’m always thinking about race, gender, class, and geopolitical contexts. I’m from the generation of curators that includes Okwui Enwezor and Octavio Zaya for whom race has been a paramount issue. I remember one of the curators of the first Manifesta—Katalyn Neray—said that she was only thinking about quality and not if the work was produced by a man or a woman, by a white or a black person—as if neutrality could exist. But then, when we think about neutrality, and when we think about beauty or quality, we are typically thinking about the male paradigm, or the phallographic and white paradigm. But quality is in fact a concept of exclusion elaborated from the hegemonic paradigm. So, we have to re-invent the concept of quality and beauty and learn that there are other kinds of beauty that we have to understand, that we have to learn how to enjoy. We need to look globally and learn to be touched by works and visions that are unfamiliar to us.

CdZ: Sometimes it’s very difficult to include the artists who are unfamiliar or simply non-Western. You really have to fight for them and put your foot down and say no, these artists have to be included. It’s not always easy.

Audience Questions and Comments

Kristen Diane Clifford: To the question about women not helping other women, it's a big topic of conversation for your generation, but hopefully less of an issue for younger people. There's a concept called "Shine Theory" that's relevant here. It means that we can shine and uplift each other collectively in order to move beyond a scarcity mindset into one of plenty. In other words, "I don't shine if you don't shine."

Lara Perry: All of you have worked in such different contexts over many decades. I wanted to ask the speakers what has changed over the time that you've all been working?

CM: Ten years ago, I had to justify myself for at least fifty percent of the time about why I curated *Elles*. What has changed today is I don't have to justify the fact that I'm curating a collective women artists exhibition. That's a huge change.

ASH: The one change I have noticed is that the cost of a good Artemisia Gentileschi has been rising up into the millions—which it never was before—and this is true of other women artists from the past. If good works by historic women artists come onto the market, they are very expensive. That tells you something about people's desire to own these works.

MR: If we're to go back to Linda Nochlin's essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" when she argued that it was the art institutions and the education systems that needed to change drastically for women's status to improve within the art world, those have certainly shifted. We've seen tremendous change in the educational arena—with women representing the majority of MFA programs. Nonetheless, we still have so much further to go. Until we see progress trickle down into all aspects of the art world—solo exhibition schedules at museums, gallery representation, price differentials, press coverage, etc.—I will not be content.

Helena Reckitt: We do seem to be seeing a shift in terms of female artists, feminist artists, queer, etc., having representation in terms of being included in exhibitions and perhaps even collections. But, what about the broader impact of feminist critique and activism in the way that the art organizations are run? Because we've seen many examples where very radical artworks about childcare or sexual violence, racialized violence are displayed, but the conditions under which those works are presented actually perpetuate some patriarchal, neoliberal systems which are undermine feminized and racialized workers. These conditions exasperate the kind of feminized economy that is part of our precarious art world. So, I was also wondering what people could observe about how feminism could be applied on the level of structure, not just representation?

MR: So, instead of 'talking the talk,' institutions need to look internally and recognize they have underpaid labor, are not offering childcare for their workers, and are preserving white patriarchal, male-centric institutions. Not only are they overpaying their directors, but they are maintaining predominantly white, male exhibition schedules, while ignoring larger structural issues that need attending to. All of these sorts of inherently feminist caring opportunities are not being offered by institutions. Given that she runs a feminist organization, I'd like to hear from Daria about this.

DK: Having worked in different institutions in other countries, I've experienced all sorts of incoherences, to put it softly, between what I've seen behind the doors, in the offices, and the values an institution was proclaiming to support. For instance, total whiteness of the staff

working in the artistic programming, while people of color are working in security and not getting tickets for lunch that other ‘artistic’ people were getting and had to eat in a different location. This inevitably led to a racial segregation within the institution—people working there didn’t mix. Once I was in an elevator with a person who was working as an intern and during their lunch break, they had to go get a special type of dessert for the director. The white team was organizing shows by artists of color and by female artists, both just within the required quota... and many more disturbing examples of this sort. When I founded Mimosa House, I wanted to make sure the principles of feminism were embedded in how the institution was run. One of the most emblematic shows for Mimosa House happened in 2018 and was titled *Do you keep thinking there must be another way*. The fundamental question we asked was how to remain and not to withdraw when you profoundly disagree with the system that you are also a part of. The show reflected on emotional, artistic, caring labors as undervalued and often not remunerated at all within the system of patriarchy. Important to mention, that the show was co-curated with my dear friends, Jessica Vaughan, Ellie Greig, and Cicely Farrer, who I met on a curatorial Master’s program and already back in 2011 where we shared interest in feminist methodologies. As a team of four curators, we wanted to reflect on how to implement our realities and ongoing personal experiences into working on this project for over a year. Three of us combined work on this project with other full time institutional jobs, one gave birth half way through the process, another had a three-year-old at home. We talked a lot about how an art institution can be organized following feminist principles and values that would enable curators, artists, and all people involved in the process to combine their caring responsibilities and activist work with institutional and project-based work, and to feel appreciated. Our work as a feminist institution is also about constant re-evaluation of the language we use: the pronouns, as well as words which better describe our identities and our differences.

Peggy Phelan: I think it is crucial that these women address the ‘future.’ Recent transformations in museums from ethics of funders to sexism and racism of contemporary practices might mean that there is a genuine opening for feminist curation, or it might mean a repression of all political exhibitions. I would love to hear your predictions for the coming years and the future and how this might pan out.

DK: In terms of what I’ve experienced in running Mimosa House, under a feminist intersectional umbrella, is the importance of very specific actions. So, we decided to list our planned actions publicly: we analyze the work we’ve done and what we want to change, choosing to be very transparent with our audiences. For example, back in June 2020 in the context of Black Lives Matter, we produced a list of action points that we were going to undertake as an institution, which included some interior changes, such as diversifying our advisory board. Also, as a public institution, it’s important for us to be selective and responsible about who our funders are. Another thing which we are planning to do is a code of conduct which we’ll place right by the entrance to our gallery. We’ll include that in our emails to people who sign up to our events to ensure that all people who come to Mimosa House feel safe and protected, as being a space for communities is as important as being an exhibition space. So, I believe we need more institutional transparency and specific actions—and to stick to them.

CdZ: Recently, when I was editing a book of my essays on women artists over the past twenty-five years, entitled *Women's Work is Never Done*,⁸ I was struck by the memories of wonderful friendships and by the deeper story that they traced. Not about my life, nor even just about the artists, but about a world that had always been hidden in plain sight. It was a story of empathy and relation shaping society, and of conversations that were to last a lifetime. The world it describes is not one in which women are the issue, but one in which the voices of women bring about and drive forward changes for the future that would once have been understood only at the margin. There is so much that is cruel and that threatens us, but women need to speak for life, hope, beauty, and resistance. That is our continuing struggle, and it is very encouraging to see how many young women artists from very diverse backgrounds, as mentioned before, are maintaining this legacy... On the future, on sisterhood!

CM: On the future...and on the past: one of the amazing discoveries we've had through AWARE's many symposiums and collective research, is that sisterhood among artists really started a century before we expect. Not in the 1960s, but most probably in the 1860s. It's a long, deep history of helping each other, and it happened in nearly every country and continent. This is something to remember!

RM: As to the future, I think we have to keep on doing this work because every twenty years or so there is a backlash against feminism. We need to keep reinventing the wheel. We must continue to reignite the conversation over and over again. Because it is a must and because it is good for our children and for the next generation. As the people from the Zapatistas Indigenous Communities from Chiapas (Mexico) state: "Cuando una mujer avanza no hay hombre que retroceda" ("A woman's step forward is never a man's step back").

Camille Morineau is the co-founder and director of AWARE (Archives of Women Artists, Research and Exhibitions), a French non-profit organization dedicated to the creation, indexation, and distribution of information on women artists of the 19th and 20th centuries. With degrees from both the École normale supérieure and the Institut national du patrimoine, she has worked for twenty years in public cultural institutions in France, including ten years as curator of the contemporary collections at the Musée national d'art moderne – Centre Georges-Pompidou (Paris). She has curated numerous exhibitions there, including *Yves Klein* (2006), *Gerhard Richter* (2012), *Roy Lichtenstein* (2013), and the display for *elles@centrepompidou* (2009-2011) dedicated solely to female artists from the collections of the Musée national d'art moderne. She has also curated several exhibitions as a freelance curator, including *Niki de Saint Phalle* at RMN – Grand Palais (Paris, 2014) and Guggenheim Bilbao (2016), *Ceramix. From Rodin to Schütte*, about the use of ceramics by artists of the 20th and 21st centuries, at the Bonnefanten Museum Maastricht (2015) and La maison rouge, Fondation Antoine de Galbert, with Manufacture de Sèvres (Paris, 2016). From 2016 to October 2019, she was the director of exhibitions and collections at Monnaie de Paris, where she curated the following exhibitions: *Women House*, also shown at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington (2017-2018); *Floor-naments*, an exhibition marking the 40th anniversary of the Centre Pompidou (2017); *Subodh Gupta* (2018); *Thomas Schütte* (2019), and *Kiki Smith* (2019-2020).

Daria Khan is the curator of Mimosa House, an independent non-profit art institution that she founded in 2017 in London. Dedicated to artistic experimentation and collaboration, Mimosa House supports dialogue between intergenerational women and queer artists. Daria's recent curatorial projects include *Tender Touches*, Austrian Cultural Forum, London; *Mechanisms of Happiness* at Photographers Gallery, London; *Levitare* at Freiraum 21 International, MuseumsQuartier Vienna; the Public Program of the 5th Moscow Biennial, Moscow. Daria was a curator in residency at the MuseumsQuartier, Vienna and a participant of EUNIC program at the Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Daria participated in various talks and conferences, including Oxford University (Christ Church), School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Centre Pompidou. She received her MA in Curating Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art, London, and is currently undertaking the MPhil/PhD Art Programme at Goldsmiths University, London.

Catherine de Zegher is a Member of the Royal Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts and was the Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent (Belgium). In 2012, she was the Artistic Director of the 18th Biennale of Sydney, Australia, and in 2013 of the 5th Moscow Biennale, Russia. She curated the Australian Pavilion (Simryn Gill) at the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013, and the Belgian Pavilion (Thierry de Cordier) at the 47th Venice Biennale in 1997. As Guest Curator in the Department of Drawings at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, she organized the large-scale exhibition *On Line: Drawing Through the Twentieth Century* (2010-2011). From 2007-2009, de Zegher was the Director of Exhibitions and Publications at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Previous to this position, from 1999-2006, she was the Executive Director and Chief Curator of the Drawing Center in New York for many years. Before de Zegher took up her career in North America, she was the co-founder and Director of the Kanaal Art Foundation in Kortrijk, Belgium (1988-1998). De Zegher is the curator of many acclaimed historical and contemporary exhibitions, such as *America: Bride of the Sun. 500 Years of Latin America and the Low Countries* (1992) at the Royal Museum of Fine Art, Antwerp; and *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (1994-1996) at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Several of her projects and books promote the feminine principle. In the last twenty years, de Zegher has received Best Show awards from AICA and AAMC. Author and editor of numerous books on modern and contemporary artists, one of her publications is the October Book *Women Artists at the Millennium* co-edited with Carol Armstrong (MIT Press). In 2014, de Zegher published *Women's Work Is Never Done*, an anthology of her collected essays on the work of contemporary women artists. Most recently, in 2020, she published a sequel to *Inside the Visible*, for its 25th Anniversary, in a Dutch mook (magazine/book) *SeeAllThis #20*.

Rosa Martínez is an independent curator, writer, and art collections consultant. She lives in Barcelona where she obtained her degree in art history. She was curator of several major international biennials, including Istanbul, 1997; SITE Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, 1999; Busan, Korea, 2000; São Paulo, 2006; Moscow, 2005-2007. In 2005, she was director of the 51st International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale with the exhibition *Always a Little Further* in the Arsenale, which made her—together with Maria de Corral, responsible for the Italian Pavilion—the first female director of this event in its 110-year history. Always with a feminist approach, she has also curated significant thematic exhibitions like *Fear Nothing, She Says. When Art Reveals Mystic Truths* (2015) devoted to the legacy of Saint Teresa of Avila, for the Museo Nacional de Escultura in Valladolid, Spain; *Intimacy is Political: Sex, Gender, Language, Power* (2017) for the Centro Cultural Metropolitano in Quito, Ecuador, or *In the Name of the Father* (2019) at the Picasso Museum in Barcelona, Spain. From 2004-

2007, Martínez served as Chief Curator of the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art. In addition to curating many solo and group shows, she has also been a prolific lecturer and a regular contributor to numerous exhibition catalogues, art journals, and newspapers. She is currently writing a book on her curatorial visions and experiences.

Maura Reilly is a curator and arts writer who has organized dozens of exhibitions internationally with a specific focus on marginalized artists. She has written extensively on global contemporary art and curatorial practice, including, most recently *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (Thames & Hudson, 2018), which was named a “Top 10 Best Art Book of 2018” by the *New York Times*. Her next book, *Museums & Social Justice*, is forthcoming from Thames & Hudson in 2022, followed by a textbook on feminist art, also with Thames & Hudson. Reilly is the Founding Curator of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum, where she developed and launched the first exhibition and public programming space in the USA devoted entirely to feminist art. While there, she organized several landmark exhibitions, including the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, the blockbuster *Global Feminisms* (co-curated with Linda Nochlin), and *Ghada Amer: Love Had No End, Burning Down the House*, among others. Other notable exhibitions include *Miriam Schapiro: An American Visionary*, *Richard Bell: Uz v. Them*, *Nayland Blake: Behavior*, *Carolee Schneemann: Painting, What It Became*, *La Mirada Iracunda (The Furious Gaze)*, *Neo-Queer*, among others. She is a co-founder of two initiatives dedicated to fighting discrimination against women in the art world—The Feminist Art Project (TFAP) and Feminist Curators United (FcU). She received her M.A. and PhD in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, and is an Editor-at-Large for *The Brooklyn Rail*. Dr. Reilly is an Associate Professor of Art History and Museum Studies at Arizona State University.

Endnotes

The panelists would like to thank Phong Bui, Artistic Director of *The Brooklyn Rail*, for the opportunity to present our ideas as part of the “Common Ground” series. Thanks also to Tabitha Steinberg for the transcription.

References

AWARE: Archives of Women Artists, Research, and Exhibitions.

<https://awarewomenartists.com/en/>

Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” *ArtNews* (January 1971).

Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London/New York: Thames & Hudson, 2018).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1987).

¹ *Women Artists: 1950-1990* (1976), Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, December 21, 1976 -March 1977.

² *From La Tintoretta to Artemisia Gentileschi* (later titled *The Ladies of the Baroque*) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent (October 20, 2018-January 20, 2019).

³ *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art* (2007), Brooklyn Museum, March 23–July 1, 2007, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin.

⁴ *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 4–July 16, 2007, curated by Cornelia Butler.

⁵ *Women House* (2017), Monnaie de Paris, Paris, October 20, 2017–January 28, 2018.

⁶ Amelia Jones as quoted in *Curatorial Activism*, p. 60.

⁷ *L'autre continent (The other continent) – Artistes, Femmes, Africaines (2016)*, Museum d'Histoire Naturelle, Le Havre, Paris, September 15 – December 31, 2016.

⁸ Catherine de Zegher, *Women's Work Is Never Done: An Anthology* (Ghent: AsaME, 2014).