

Living the Revolution

A Dialogue Between

Maura Reilly & Lara Perry

Lara Perry: You are the Founding Curator of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum¹, where you conceptualised the first exhibition space in the world dedicated exclusively to feminist art. While there you organised several exhibitions, including *Global Feminisms* (co-curated with Linda Nochlin) and the permanent reinstatement of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. What do you think the creation of such a space suggests about the current status of feminism in the art world?

Maura Reilly: I think it represents an enormous achievement. Importantly, its opening in 2007 came at a time when there was a great resurgence of interest in feminist art, exemplified by multiple exhibitions of feminist art worldwide, including *Global Feminisms*, *Wack!*, and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (all in 2007), then *Gender Check* (2009–10) and *Elles* (2009–11), among many others.

Simultaneously, MoMA had launched its “Women Project” (MWP), an initiative begun in 2005, not from within MoMA, but at the suggestion of donor Sarah Peters, with the aim of reassessing the museum's traditionally masculinist canon, and which has resulted in multiple symposia, education programs, a major publication, solo exhibitions of women artists, and numerous acquisitions. A year later, in 2006, I helped establish The Feminist Art Project (TFAP) (along with Arlene Raven, Judy Chicago, Dena Muller, Judy Brodsky, Ferris Olin, and Susan Fisher Sterling), which sought to capitalise on the opening of the Sackler Center, which we all viewed as a groundbreaking museological development. Its initial aim was to spark new initiatives throughout the country that would build on the momentum started by the announcement of the Sackler Center.

The conflation of these exhibitions and projects precipitated a renewed mainstream interest in feminist art—one that I believe continues until today.

LP: In June 2015, you published a widely publicised article in ARTnews, “Taking The Measure Of Sexism: Facts, Figures, And Fixes”, in which you explored the statistics of the representation of women artists in various outlets of the art world. Can you say something about the continuing significance of empirical investigation in the work of the feminist curator?

MR: I think empirical investigation is important for *all* feminists, in any discipline, not just curating. Counting is, after all, a feminist strategy. I've been collecting statistics for over a decade, the Guerrilla Girls since 1984, the Gallery Tally since 2013, and Pussy Galore since 2014. What's clear in all of these instances is that the more closely one examines art world statistics, the more glaringly obvious it becomes that the majority of exhibitions/galleries continue to present art by white, Euro-American, heterosexual, privileged, and, above all, male artists. In its most recent report (2015), for instance, Gallery Tally looked at over 4,000 artists, represented in LA and New York and of those, 32.3% of them were women. (A recent audit of the galleries in London demonstrates similar figures. In 2013, East London Fawcett (ELF) examined the artists represented by 134 commercial galleries in London and found that 31% were women.) It's egregious.

Hence the necessity of reminding the art world of these discrepancies because the real problem is that sexism is still so woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected. But ignoring sexism certainly won't make it go away. If we cannot help others to see the structural problems, then we can't even begin to fix them. In other words, how can we get people to “think about gender”? How can we get those in the art world to recognize, accept, and acknowledge that there is indeed inequality of the sexes? The question becomes, then, how can we elicit sympathy to point of action? How can we go about educating disbelievers who contend, because there are signs of improvement, that the battle has been

won? How do we fight against cognitive dissonance? As Franz Fanon explains, “Because it is so important to protect the core belief, they will rationalize, ignore and even deny anything that doesn’t fit in with the core belief.” So if we present evidence that works against people’s core belief, how can we ensure this new evidence is accepted? Or, to put it differently, how do we denaturalize what is perceived as natural? And to do so, don’t we run the risk of backlash—angry responses, denial, or worse, dismissal?

LP: In that same article in *ARTnews*, you called for more all-women and feminist exhibitions, in addition to ones with gender parity. Why is the all-woman show an important strategy for feminist curating?

MR: In my effort to encourage more women-only exhibitions, I’m often asked whether this isn’t a ghettoization of women. My answer is that until there is gender equality in the art world, women-only exhibitions will continue to be necessary. I believe firmly that exhibitions focusing exclusively on women (or Latino, African, queer artists) are not ghettoizing those artists but rather attempting to “level the playing field”. They are, in essence, curatorial correctives. After all, “greatness” in the art world has been defined since antiquity as white, privileged, Western, and above all male. Not much has changed. Yes, women have made great strides, but we still have a very long way to go—as my stats in *ARTnews* make clear.

Without women artist exhibitions, women will just continue to be invisibilized and marginalized. The key here is *visibility*, which inevitably helps women in terms of the marketplace and in art history. For instance, one need only think of historical shows like *Women Artists: 1550–1950* (1976). Curators Nochlin and Sutherland Harris literally “found” women artists who had been overlooked historically, but who are now highly visible—thanks to their efforts—and who are now featured in art history textbooks, e.g. Lavinia Fontana, Sofonisba Anguissola, etc. These women artists, excavated from museum storage in the U.S. and Western Europe—are now taught regularly, featured in dissertations, etc. In short, women-only exhibitions can have a transformative impact.

More recently, I can speak to my exhibition *Global Feminisms*, co-curated with Linda Nochlin, an all-women show featuring many artists working outside the marketplace, and many who’d never shown in the U.S. before, or rarely (Arahmaiani,

Regina José Galindo, Tomoko Sawada, Parastou Forouhar). Most of these artists now have gallery representation in the U.S. In sum, with a blockbuster show in NYC that received lots of press (*NYT*, *Times*, *VV*, *New Yorker*, etc.), their *visibility* as artists increased exponentially, and certainly helped some of their careers. Visibility again is the key here. And, as such, hopefully no curator/gallerist/collector can argue they don’t have enough knowledge about women artists for inclusion in shows or collections.

Of course, I understand that women-only exhibitions are essentialist. However, until women have a better foothold, we need to preserve the category “woman” (an always already essentialist term). But we must also recognise that we live in an undeniably essentialist world. If we want to “use the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house”, as it were, then don’t we need to use the language of “essentialism” to do so—even at the same time that we realize the term is exclusionary and doesn’t account for the important differences between and amongst women?

I suppose I’m thinking here of Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism”, which means acting ‘as if’ identities are stable for political reasons. So, for example, one might temporarily accept the category of ‘woman’ as a stable unity for the purposes of mobilising women in feminist political action.

My concern, however, with women-only exhibitions is whether we’re only preaching to the converted. Who attends these shows? Is it women only and their allies? Is the mainstream public attending? And, if it’s the former, then how can we ultimately institute change?

Thus, are exhibitions with gender parity better? What if the Whitney Biennial or Venice Biennale or Documenta were more diverse—in terms of race, gender, and sexuality? What if galleries were? Or, what if permanent collections at museums were more fair and just? Imagine the impact—on the art market, collectors, gallerists, curators, students, etc. Could this be mandated?

Apropos of this, in 2005, feminist curator Xabier Arakistain developed a Manifesto at Arco Madrid, signed by prominent figures from the art world, which mandated that 50% of the works purchased by the publicly funded Spanish museums be by women artists. The manifesto did not succeed in changing any museum acquisition policies, but it

certainly raises an interesting question: Should we be advocating for affirmative action curating and collecting?

LP: Do you endorse initiatives like the Moderna Museet's "Second Museum of Our Wishes", which fundraised specifically to extend its collection through the acquisition of works by women artists?

MR: Yes, of course, I endorse any initiative that grants women artists increased visibility. Though, in that instance, I was disappointed that the museum enhanced its collection by only twenty-four works by thirteen artists. And why did the initiative last only two years? Why not fundraise to ensure collecting women in perpetuity? If not, then doesn't the gesture become simply tokenist? And I suppose I wonder, cynically, how often those twenty-four works are exhibited?

LP: Is the status of women artists in the commercial market an important component in rectifying gender inequality?

MR: The commercial market is an arena of the art world where women are particularly unequal. For instance, the highest price paid to date for a living woman artist is \$7.1 million, for a Yayoi Kusama painting, in comparison with an editioned sculpture by Jeff Koons, which sold for \$58.4 million. Likewise, the most ever paid to date for a dead woman artist is \$44.4 million for a Georgia O'Keeffe painting, versus \$142.4 million for a Francis Bacon triptych.

To address these wide discrepancies, we must work to create an art world in which high qualities, rather than high prices, are continuously reinforced as the touchstones of success, for men and women equally. Or, as John Spero humorously explained (*London Evening Standard*, December 10, 2014), the true sign of equality will be "when art by women is just as unaffordable to most as art by men".

LP: In your 2009 interview with Amelia Jones and Connie Butler for the *Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (Second edition, London and New York: Routledge, 2009), you make a distinction between curating feminist art, and curating using feminist methodologies. (You give the example of projects you worked on in the Brooklyn Museum with curators from the Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern departments, which you worked on to explore the meaning of feminist methodologies in collections not easily associated with feminism). Beyond working towards equal

numerical representation of women artists and curating feminist content, are there other strategies that you think are important for feminist curating?

MR: Yes. I think it's imperative that we also focus our attention on topics/work that may not be defined as "feminism" per se, but that relates directly to issues of sexuality and gender. We should be advocating for exhibitions of women artists even in the absence of their direct identification with feminism, as well as employing women artists in different kinds of programming and publishing.

We should also be encouraging collectors and gallerists to purchase and represent more women, and museums to change their acquisition policies to ensure gender balance in their collections. We should be insisting on more press coverage on exhibitions of women artists, and continue to produce shows.

LP: In your 2012 talk on feminist and queer curating at Tate Modern², you introduced a number of independent curators whom you described as making important interventions inspired by feminism in the exhibition programmes of various institutions. Do you understand these independent curators as somehow working in concert to achieve a common goal?

MR: Yes, I do—though not necessarily consciously so. In that talk at Tate Modern, I presented those individuals as "curatorial activists", a term I coined to describe those curators who've made career-long commitments to ensuring that the marginalized are heard—artists of colour, as well as women and LGBTQ artists.

This is the subject of my forthcoming book, *Curatorial Activism* (Thames & Hudson, 2017), which investigates contemporary curatorial strategies providing productive alternatives to exclusionary models of collecting and display that continue to re-produce inequality, often under the aegis of the art historical canon. One chapter focuses on the historiography of feminist art exhibitions, and examines the work of several curators who have dedicated themselves almost exclusively to the feminist cause in particular, including Lucy Lippard, Rosa Martinez, Connie Butler, Helena Reckitt, Camille Morineau, Xabier Arakistain, Michiko Kasahara, Juan Vicente Aliaga, and others.

We need more people dedicating their writing, their curating, and their scholarship to feminism, not

just once, but as a whole life project/mission every day and in every way. We need more curators *living* the feminist revolution, not just paying lip service to it.

LP: Speaking of “living the revolution”, in 2014 you founded the initiative fCU (Feminist Curators United), along with Helena Reckitt and me. How does the fCu relate to your professional aspirations as a curator? And, why did you feel there was a need for such a network?

MR: My entire career as a curator and scholar has been dedicated to art in/from the margins—which is to say, art produced by those who cannot be defined as straight, white, and male. Why? Because the majority of mainstream curators focus exclusively on the rest, with often only a tokenist inclusion of “others”.

However, there are many curators working worldwide dedicated to feminist activism, including those listed above. I wanted them to understand that they were not working in isolation—and by creating a network we can support each other, e.g. share ideas, research, and suggest venues and artists.

Notes

1 The website of the Elizabeth A Sackler Center for Feminist Art can be found here <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa>, last accessed March 2016.

2 Maura Reilly delivered the keynote address at the conference “Civil Partnerships: queer and feminist curating,” held May 2012 at Tate Modern, London. The videos of the programme can be accessed here: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/civil-partnerships-queer-and-feminist-curating-video-recordings#open265737>, last accessed March 2016.

Maura Reilly, Ph.D. is Executive Director of the National Academy Museum and School in New York. As the Founding Curator of the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, she conceived and launched the very first exhibition and public programming space in the U.S. devoted entirely to feminist art, where she organized dozens of exhibitions, including the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, the critically acclaimed Global Feminisms (co-curated with Linda Nochlin), Ghada Amer: Love Has No End, Burning Down the House, among many others. She has held Senior Curator positions at the American Federation of Arts and Location One, both in New York

City, and has authored many books and articles on contemporary art. Reilly is the recipient of several prestigious awards, including ArtTable’s Future Women Leadership Award and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women’s Caucus for Art. Her most recent and forthcoming books include *Curatorial Activism* (Thames & Hudson, 2017) and *Women Artists: The Linda Nochlin Reader* (Thames & Hudson, 2015). Reilly received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

For more information, please visit www.maurareilly.com.

Lara Perry is an art historian with specialist research expertise in portraiture, gender, and art museums. She was the leader of an international research network exploring feminist curating practices that ran a programme of symposia and seminars held in locations from Washington, D.C., to Tallinn between December 2010 and May 2012, and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. She co-edited a book of essays on feminism and curating, *Politics in a The Sirens’ Song: Speech and Space in the Courthouse Imagine Law Glass Case—with Angela Dimitrakaki*, a member of the research network. Lara leads the programme in the History of Art and Design at the University of Brighton.