

**HELENA RECKITT/DOROTHEE RICHTER (Eds.):  
Instituting Feminism. OnCurating, 52, 2021  
<[www.on-curating.org/issue-52.html](http://www.on-curating.org/issue-52.html)>**

“Instituting feminism” is an extensive collection of contributions for the most part by practitioners (artists, curators, museum directors, other arts producers) and to a lesser extent by academic theorists that encompasses diverse approaches and efforts of feminist institutional critique (section 1), trailblazing examples of transforming museums and building new art institutions (section 2) as well as cases of curating with a feminist agenda (section 3) with a strong focus on the western art world. Editors Helena Reckitt—curator, researcher, and currently reader in Curating at the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Dorothee Richter—Professor in Contemporary Curating at the University of Reading, UK, envision feminist instituting “as an active, relational practice, rather than one that seeks to limit feminism to predefined methodologies or forms” (4). In that spirit the publication sets out “to move beyond identifying inequities in the cultural industries to devising tools that can foster structural change” (4). Thus, the publication communicates the political conviction that feminist instituting and curating is a necessity for overcoming inequalities in the field of art and curating while at the same time reflecting feminism’s complexities. Ultimately this is the focus and directionality of *oncurating.org* which is not only an independent international journal but also a project space in Zürich. Furthermore, it is connected to the Postgraduate Programme in Curating at Zürich University of the Arts that is overseen by Dorothee Richter.

The first section titled “Definitions and Urgencies” presents different forms and tools of feminist institutional critique. Nizan Shaked and Angela Dimitrakaki poignantly show that feminist artists and curators can try to change the world, but they still must make a living. Embedded in this contradiction, artists and curators strive for visibility and recognition, which produces a specific relationship, because “the feminist curator is dedicated to reproducing the contradiction that the feminist artist faces” (11). Thus, Shaked and Dimitrakaki define “the undoing of the politics of recognition” (17) as the most pressing urgency of feminist instituting. Nanne Buurman stresses that the refeminization of curatorial practices coincides with a feminization of labor and power under

neoliberalism that puts the curator in an ambivalent role between critique and complicity. Like Foucault, Buurman argues that under neoliberalism, disciplinary power operates on the level of freedom to individual self-exploitation and not on hierarchical domination. Buurmann observes an analogous shift in curatorial subjectivities by example of the two documenta curators Harald Szeemann and Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, that are addressed within the respective documenta exhibitions, by art works that each took the form of an epistle to the respective curator. Self-exploitation as a structural feature of freelance feminist instituting is discussed by Nina Hoechtl and Julia Wieger who work on “archival politics and historiography, particularly embedding feminist and decolonizing perspectives” (46) in the context of their project “The Secretariat of Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps” (SKGAL). For the exhibition “DARK ENERGY. Feminist Organizing. Working Collectively” they asked, “How can creative dark matter and knowledge be made visible without playing into cognitive capitalism’s hands?” (35). For the exhibition they chose the form of a diagram to make visible the “friendships, working relations, common interests, and institutional proceedings involved” but they also displayed how the budget was used and added the “non-monetary forms of exchange” (35) in order “to address unsustainable working conditions and ecologies in the cultural sector” (43). Dorothee Richter however argues for a militant approach because when it comes to the major art institutions not much has changed: neither female artists nor artists of color and migrant backgrounds are sufficiently represented. Richter demands that institutions that refuse to fulfill these “rudimentary diversity requirements” (49) should not even receive public funding.

Section 2, titled “Theory into Practice: Feminist Instituting Then and Now”, thematizes what it means to transform arts organizations and build new ones with a feminist agenda. The question of what an institution becomes if the values of hospitality, sustainability, community, and justice are realized runs like a red thread through the contributions in this section. Emelie Chhangur, the Director-Curator of Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Ontario expands on how she transforms the museum with her curatorial mode of “inreach, a non-extractive model for decolonizing the museum and its curatorial practices” (63) in collaboration with the indigenous community. The black community in Deptford, London created the Deptford People’s Heritage Museum as a vessel to organize themselves, care for each other, and to make visible the slave trade history of the Deptford Docks against the whitewashing of

the neighborhood. Alba Colomo and Lucy Lopez created *la Sala* in Nottingham making a kitchen and a table the center for being together in the space. They also cultivate a garden and ask themselves, “What can contemporary art learn from food growers, producers, and collectives?” The artists apply the method of fermenting to explore “the time, care and conditions needed to grow an ecofeminist art institution” (85). But the section also thematizes earlier examples of feminist instituting. In a round table discussion with seasoned leaders of feminist cultural institutions (Glasgow Women’s Library, Køn–Gender Museum Denmark, Akshara, Women’s Art Library) it becomes clear that these institutions are living organisms that could only sustain because of their “hybrid and category-defying nature” (90) and “dialogistic cultures” (90) enabling them to be responsive to technological changes and new urgencies on the equality agenda. Furthermore, Helena Reckitt (editor) in conversation with artist Alex Martinis Roe discuss Roe’s art practice of studying feminist genealogies. The project *To Become Two*, uncovers the history of feminist collectivity as a rich resource for unlearning and developing relations between generations to facilitate the articulation of feminist visions for the future. Berit Fischer closes the section with an excursus on her participatory art practice of embodied critique, affective encounter and relational learning exploring “ontologies for a feminist instituting” (126).

Section 3, “Curatorial Herstories” is dedicated to “projects of curating feminist or women’s art and curating with a feminist agenda or perspective” (6). Ann Sutherland Harris, Daria Khan, Rosa Martínez, Camille Morineau, Maura Reilly, and Catherine de Zegher discuss the impact of their feminist curatorial activism. De Zegher looks back at the exhibition *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of the 20th-century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in Boston and says that

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 21<sup>st</sup> century society (151).

Daria Khan argues that the potential of being impactful lies in “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” (152). Camille Morineau points out that “What has changed today is I don’t have to justify the fact that I’m curating a collective women artists exhibition” (157). On the same topic, Ann Sutherland Harris notes that, “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” (157). Helena Reckitt then brings the discussion back to the question of institutional change instead of mere representation of female, feminist and queer artists, which has significantly improved. Furthermore, we learn about three socially engaged projects by curators Ève Chabanon, Anna Colin and Madeleine Planeix-Crocker that used their institutions, not to improve representation, but to facilitate personal transformation through writing and theater play, by setting up a cooperative for knowledge and skill exchange, and the emancipatory experience of collective filmmaking. They also reflect on the complexities of such participatory projects, especially the fact that engagement with art institutions is unpaid labor. Erin L. McCutcheon presents a case study for a “feminist approach to curating a career retrospective” and looks at Mónica Mayers “Si tiene dudas... pregunte: una exposición retrocolectiva de Mónica Mayer” (173) that not only was a retrospective of Mayer’s career but included the history of the feminist movement in Mexico that is constitutive for Mayer’s oeuvre.

Reshma Chhibha and Nontobeko Ntombela (*The Two Talking Yonis*) critique how black women artists are exhibited mostly in group shows and “presented through hackneyed terms like “identity””. These racializing and gendering mechanisms exert what they call “violence in curatorial frameworks” (198). Chhibha and Nontobeko demand that Black women artists’ works are encountered in a way that overcomes “conservative authoritative views that still dominate exhibition practices, overriding the progressive work presented by the exhibiting artists” (209). Lastly Elena Zaytseva discusses the black-and-white photographic documentation of two versions of *Room N°3* by Irina Nakhova as “some of the finest examples of feminist institutional critique, created at a time when feminism was practically mute in Russia” (214).

The journal issue “Instituting Feminism” captivates by its intelligent choice of examples and topics of discourse that unfold the complexity of the field. The presentation of the many practical cases and use of different forms of contributions, from articles and interviews, to conversations, round table discussions and visual essays makes this a vivid reading experience that opens the dialogic cosmos of feminist instituting. The ambition of the publication to devise tools that foster structural change is not fulfilled by a quick read. Instead, it requires a deeper engagement with the thinkers, artists and curators who created this

compilation. Nonetheless, it is an abundant resource that is a must-read for professionals in cultural management to build the mind-set needed for disrupting neoliberal, patriarchal, heteronormative power structures in the art world, and increase appreciation and acknowledgment for the societal significance of the diverse life-affirming expressions of feminist instituting.

**JENNY FADRANSKI\***

University of Iceland / School of Humanities

## **Christian Saehrendt: Kunst im Kreuzfeuer. documenta, Weimarer Republik, Pariser Salons: Moderne Kunst im Visier von Extremisten und Populisten. Stuttgart (Franz Steiner) 2020, 241 Seiten und 24 Abb.**

Der 2020 von dem Kunsthistoriker Christian Saehrendt herausgegebene Band *Kunst im Kreuzfeuer*, der sich u.a. ausführlich mit der *documenta* befasst, hat angesichts der aktuellen Diskussionen um antisemitische Darstellungen auf der fünfzehnten Ausgabe der Kassler Ausstellung eine bemerkenswerte Aktualität erhalten.

„Moderne Kunst im Visier von Extremisten und Populisten“, so der Untertitel, weist letztlich auf die Politisierung und Ideologisierung von Kunstdebatten, die mit dem Einsatz der Moderne durchaus charakteristisch sind. Zu diesem Thema hat Saehrendt in den letzten Jahren eine ganze Reihe von mal populäreren, mal wissenschaftlicheren Büchern vorgelegt. Genannt seien für erstere eine Gebrauchsanweisung (*Das kann ich auch! Gebrauchsanweisung für Moderne Kunst*, 2007), den Sprachführer Kunst (*Das sagt mir was: Sprachführer Kunst: Sprachführer Deutsch – Kunst / Kunst – Deutsch*, 2008) oder der Band *Ist das Kunst oder kann das weg? Vom wahren Wert der Kunst* (2016). Alle Bände

\* jenny@hi.is