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## **'OTHER' AND 'NOT-ALL', RETHINKING THE PLACE OF THE WOMAN ARTIST IN 'CONTEMPORARY ART'**

This article offers a feminist analysis of how women artists routinely appear in theorisations of contemporary art – both collectively and individually - and how this is often mapped against their relative and different visibility in modernism/postmodernism. Within these three commonly-used periods in 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art (contemporary/ postmodern/ modern), there remains a conservative (albeit academic and potentially liberal) set of assumptions about where women artists “fit”, and typically their role is as marginal “Others” in need of “recuperation” or “reassessment”. However, these feminist questions are also tied to how these three historical “periods” themselves are cast.

The problem of the woman artist which I want to highlight is neatly framed in Žižek’s discussion of Lacan’s “universal Exception” as ‘a fundamental feature of the symbolic order’ (the “big Other”).<sup>1</sup> Adapting his analysis to feminist ends, let us read the symbolic order - the order of universality and the big “Other” -in terms of mainstream readings of what constitutes modern and contemporary art (to which we all conform, and in relation to which we define ourselves as Žižek suggests: ‘the frame around the frame’). In Žižek’s reading of Lacan’s “formulae of

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<sup>1</sup> Žižek, Slavoj (2006). “Preface: the big Other between violence and civility”, in *The Universal Exception*. London: Continuum, vii.

sexuation” there are ‘two aspects of the inconsistency of the big Other: the symbolic order is by definition antagonistic, thwarted, non-identical with itself, marked by a constitutive lack, virtual – or as Lacan put it, “there is no big Other” while acknowledging that at the same time the big Other continues to emerge in life (as a meta-narrative or fantasmatic projection) because ‘each universality’ is ‘grounded in its constitutive exception’. While it is the exception which demonstrates how the symbolic order itself functions and throws it into relief, this is also ‘supplemented with its no less paradoxical obverse, the so-called “not-All” [pas tout]: an order (or rather a field, a signifying space) with no exception that is *eo ipso* not-all and cannot be idealised’.<sup>2</sup> These two features present themselves in how women artists appear in art history today: namely, as the constitutive exception and the “not-All” (of modern/postmodern/contemporary art). Whichever position is taken, what disappears most from view is feminist art, feminist subjects and feminist readings.

### Exceptional Modernists

Modernist women artists are regularly identified as the ‘constitutive exception’ in art history (even by feminist art historians recovering these histories): they are the exceptions which prove the rule about “universalism” within Modernism (as defined by their male peers with reference to “modernity”, modern art movements and avant gardes). Where they departed from these versions of Modernism with their own visions of the world, their works are measured in subjective, particular and ex-centric ways (i.e. as eccentric and individual, but definitely outside the norm). These women artists, who came to significant public attention as professional artists, are in addition ‘magnificent exceptions’ in popular terms: to their sex (other women) and to that gross definition of women artists (the lady amateurs).<sup>3</sup> What their role as ‘constitutive exception’ cannot do is redefine the principles of modernism itself i.e. force us all to read modernism differently, because they are “outside” or “marginal” to it: instead, their existence

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<sup>2</sup> Žižek, “Preface”, vii.

<sup>3</sup> Chadwick, Whitney and Courtivron, Isabelle de (eds.) (1993). *Significant Others: Creativity and Intimate Partnership*. London: Thames and Hudson. The definition of the ‘selective tradition’ comes from Williams, Raymond (1980). ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Theory’ in his *Problems in Materialism and Culture*. London: Verso, 39.

in the numerous and accumulating examples of women Modernist artists, can show us only the strength and variety of modernist principles through this “exceptionalism”.

In feminist art history, European and American modernism was critiqued for its gendered discourse, its silence on women artists, and its repeated presentation of women artists as followers not innovators in every modern movement. Many feminist scholars (for four decades now) have explored the marginalised, neglected, forgotten but Significant “Others” in modern art (also identifiable as the female relatives, art school peers, co-workers of modernist enterprises, magazines and manifestoes, as well as the wives, muses and lovers of better-known male artists). The “minoritised” presence of women artists (typically less than 10%) in each modern movement in art history remains a gross distortion of their lived reality as artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a figure which really is or was 25%-33% of artists in the first part of the century – but it is the result of the selective tradition at work.<sup>4</sup> Detailed biographies or catalogues raisonné now exist for many (but by no means all) modernist women artists and the recovery of women artists’ work, through major retrospectives and the re-hanging of museums has produced considerable changes in the last 40 years. Detailed analyses of the prejudices of criticism and bias against women artists have been written and the gender bias in theorisations of modern art in relation to “modernism” and “modernity” has been explored.<sup>5</sup> However, most of this has occurred within the general periodisation of “modern” as “modern art movements” from Impressionism to Pop Art. Attempts have been made to rewrite modernist art history and modernism itself as a gendered symbolic exchange focusing on MoMa’s ‘Red Hot Mamas’; or the figure of the female flaneuse; or the gendering

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<sup>4</sup> Deepwell, Katy (ed.) (1998). *Women Artists and Modernism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press; and Deepwell, Katy (2010). *Women Artists Between the Wars*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. See also Gaze, Delia (ed.) (1997). *Dictionary of Women Artists 2 Vols*. London: Fitzroy Dearborn.

<sup>5</sup> Molly Nesbitt suggest in her comments ‘Questions of Perspective’ in Armstrong, Carol and Zegher, Catherine de (2006). *Women Artists at the End of the Millennium*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 123-124 – that there is a major gap between intellectual feminism and the woman artist because art criticism is still considered by the University to have the same function as in Greenberg’s day. The sheer complexity of contemporary art requires shifting models away from certainties of 30 years ago and criticism losing its “function, its purchase and its hold” in trying to “know” the present.

of public and private spaces of modernity; or modernism's irrational character in contrast to modernity's rationalism and progress.<sup>6</sup> But still the habitual patterns of the culture industry remain and reproduce themselves alongside the expectations of an all-male significant canon: Kahlo's popularity does not rival Picasso's or Diego Riviera's; the *Amazons of the Avantgarde*<sup>7</sup> do not displace the masculinist and heroic presentation of Malevich or the Russian Constructivists. The failure of many modernist scholars to incorporate or address feminist scholarship remains lamentable (even in an inadequate form of tokenism!). Art history as a discipline continues to sideline "feminism" into a peripheral sub-category of readings only about women artists (and many feminists continue to write national art histories focused on the "marginalised" Others outside the canon). The alternative thesis is not to discuss women's cultural production at all (perpetuating the invisibility and sexism of the Great Masters' thesis, without Old Mistresses, and creating a "new backlash").

Feminist scholars, like myself, want to retain the possibility of speaking about the specificity of women artists and feminism, while at the same time, changing the narrative away from previously accepted formulations because we recognise that the situation has changed profoundly for women artists in their daily lives and in their art practices. I am proposing (following Gayatri Spivak<sup>8</sup>) "productively undoing" these generally held assumptions about women artists in relation to the "contemporary", where it is opposed to either the "modern"/ "postmodern", because of the limitations imposed upon how all women artists' work is read, individually and collectively either as "Other" or "not-All": i.e. as an exception or not a subject of interest. This framework of "Otherness", as an exception, for the woman artist continues into discussions of contemporary art (especially where art history retains a modernist slant) but this now co-exists alongside the second point from Žižek's analysis.

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<sup>6</sup> These topics are direct references to the writing of Carol Duncan, Janet Wolff, Griselda Pollock, Amelia Jones.

<sup>7</sup> *Amazons of Avantgarde* was the title of a Guggenheim international touring exhibition and book of Russian avant-garde women artists from 1920s: Bowlt, John E. and Drutt, Matthew (eds.) (2000). *Amazons of Avantgarde*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak, Gayatri (2012). Introduction. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1.

## Contemporary Women Artists as “not-All”

How has the question of women artists shifted to become the “Not-All” against the symbolic order for “contemporary art”? Here contemporary women artists, in particular, have become the paradoxical obverse of the big Other: the “not-All”, which cannot be idealised, a lack without exception or symbolisation in relation to the “big Other” (the main agenda/ symbolic order of modern/contemporary art: which is itself fractured, incoherent and contested). In both cases, the “big Other” does not change: it is marked by its own reinforcement of the same: even where a Modernist DWEM culture (dead white Euro-American males) has shifted to a global pattern of different or diverse “cultural dominants”, fashion-defining trends or a list of 100 “key artists” (the motif adopted by so many global and contemporary art books). However, both cases, the exception and the “not-All” in relation to the ‘big Other’, are fantasmatic projections (ie. both a projection and a Phallic fantasy). They can and should be thought differently as should the fractured and uneven development of “global contemporary art”.

The presence of so many women artists as key players on the international stage has dramatically shifted their relation to ‘contemporary art’ from a marginal position to a defining one. Women artists are not only no longer an ‘exception’ to the new phenomena of itinerant cultural entrepreneurs of the new millennium exhibiting and speaking trans-nationally, inter-continently and internationally about their practice, but they have become a “not-All”, a presence which is not remarked upon and which seals a new form of invisibility by this silence.<sup>9</sup> The practices of certain women artists are frequently cited by critics, curators and some art historians, as central to defining the ‘contemporary’, but even in these

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<sup>9</sup> *The Independent*'s coverage of the Kiev Biennale is just one example: 29 women artists and 36 male artists took part in the commissioned work - yet the women were invisible to Gareth Harris in *The Independent* 23 July 2012 as of 9 artists mentioned in the review, no individual woman artist is mentioned as worthy of note. A woman's name only figures once in the name of the couple: Ilya and Amelia Kabakov “Two things stand out at the first Kiev International Biennale: the superior video pieces on show and a range of intelligent, original works made by a selection of Ukrainian artists (22 in total).” Another example of ‘Women as Other’ is a special Holland Cotter article in *The New York Times* on ‘China’s Female Artists Quietly Emerge’ (*The New York Times* 30 July 2008) ...“a fair number of successful female artists in China are halves of art-world couples” one of the photography captions reads: ‘PAINTING HERSELF INTO A MAN’S WORLD. Contemporary art in China is generally dominated by men, but women like Li Shurui, above in the mask she wears while airbrushing, are quietly emerging as artists’.

“positive” citations, feminist politics or readings of their work completely disappear from view.<sup>10</sup> This question is tied in with how we conceive of the “contemporary” in terms of time frames as it is quickly shifting to “global art” or “art in the age of globalisation”. It is in the 1990s that women artists regularly start to emerge as between 20-40% of major shows and biennales internationally. Catherine David’s *Documenta X* (1997) first showed women as more than 28% of the artists and this became 46% in Ruth Noack’s curation of *Documenta 12* (2007).<sup>11</sup> Only after the 1990s is this trend evident globally as Asian art biennales develop this phenomenon.<sup>12</sup> Catherine David’s focus on time periods, post-1945, post-1968 in framing contemporary art placed a renewed stress on re-conceiving late modernism/postmodernism against liberation movements in different parts of the world and post-colonial discourses. Feminism was part of this, which is why the proportion of women increased. *Documenta 11* developed this thesis. Ruth Noack’s curation of *Documenta 12*, echoed that of Catherine de Zegher’s exhibition *Inside the Visible* in presenting different phases of many artists’ works from the 1970s against their present works. And this strategy provided many opportunities to show early and late feminist works by women artists within an inter-generational and comparative model.

The problem of feminism – if it’s “cause” is defined only through the lack of representation of women artists - supposedly evaporated with the sheer volume of strong interesting and dynamic women artists appearing in contemporary art exhibitions. After all, there is no point in drawing attention to something that is ordinary in the midst of the culture industries’ obsessive search for novelty and “new” ideas. As a result, attempts to focus on women artists (as a group) are now treated as patronising forms of liberalism in the West (how can there be equality

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<sup>10</sup> See Bohrer, Frederick N. (2008). ‘Borders (and Boarders) of Art: Notes from a Foreign Land’, in Boullata, Kamal (ed.) *Belonging and Globalisation* (London, New York, Beirut: Saqi), 27-40, where he discusses Janane Al-Ani, Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir (all shown at Sharjah Biennale) as evidence of new subjectivities in the representation of identity exploring the problematic of belonging and not-belonging to a nation-state or place or culture, but without mentioning feminism.

<sup>11</sup> Figures for Documenta 1945-present in Deepwell, Katy ‘Equal but different: questions about rights, statistics and feminist strategies for change’ *Frauenkunstwissenschaft* (Germany) (Aug 2009): 9-27.

<sup>12</sup> Deepwell, Katy ‘On Women Artists and Feminist Analysis’ *C-arts Mag: Asian Contemporary Art and Culture* (Singapore) (Aug. 2009): 6-8.

in the art world where distinction and elitism are what count?!) or worse, seen as humanitarian endeavours which opportunistically link women's rights to human rights as a sign of progressiveness in traditional or conservative cultures aiming for a place on the international stage. The political dimension to an increase in the numbers of women artists reaching national representation in international forums/for a, which might be a symptom of political liberalism in certain regimes, may actually mask a distinct lack of tolerance in social or civil rights at home. Meanwhile, other countries continue with business-as-usual and women artists remain part of their "not-All".

The most popular and widely known views of feminist art are modelled on American art in its late modernist/postmodernist phase (confined to the 1970s or early 1980s), which in discussions of the "contemporary" give way to a transnational or globalised version of a "feminist" or "post-feminist" condition for contemporary art.<sup>13</sup> How do we offer a more profound understanding of feminism as a politics and as central to definitions of 'contemporary art' in relation to globalisation or in the intersections between globalisation theories (where gender remains an issue to be discussed) and in relation to feminism as a political movement? Locating and limiting feminist art to work produced in the USA in the 1970s, or to art only related to the body of a woman and a politics of representation about the female body in debates about sexuality or women's performance of self<sup>14</sup> (following Judith Butler's notion of performativity), or identity politics, has had a limiting effect. The political dimension to feminism in its transformation of categories and ideas, over and beyond these stereotypes or debates about representation, goes unrecognised (more instances of the "not-All" of the big Other): think, for example, of eco-Feminist work on habitus, climate change, pollution or specism. These limitations to two dominant concepts

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<sup>13</sup> This is underpinned in the WACK! / Global Feminisms dichotomy presented in 2007 – where WACK! presented artists from the 1960s to 1980s with a strong emphasis on America and Global Feminisms presented only artists born after 1960 using an area-studies model of different continental groups. See exhibition catalogues Butler, Cornelia (ed. and curator) (2007) *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Massachusetts: MIT and Los Angeles: MOCA) and Nochlin, Linda and Reilly, Maura (2007) (eds. and curators). *Global Feminisms*. London and New York: Merrell and Brooklyn Museum.

<sup>14</sup> Amelia Jones '1970/2007: The Return of Feminist Art' *Xtraonline* vol 10, no 4 (Summer 2008). Available online at: [x-traonline.org/issues/volume..4/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/](http://x-traonline.org/issues/volume..4/19702007-the-return-of-feminist-art/) [last accessed May 2013]

divorce feminism, and feminist interventions/ readings/ politics in many parts of the world, from discussions of how the ‘contemporary’ itself might be conceived: younger women artists are treated as “copying” feminist works in the American model or as producing work which is “limited” by attention to women’s rights or “the body”.

Priority in discussions of art and globalisation has been given to trends from the 1990s, and not from the 1970s or the 1960s – which for many was when “contemporary art” (i.e. art which did not define itself as ‘modernist’) arose: e.g. performance, happenings, environments, installations, public art manifestations and events. 1989 recurs frequently as the year of departure in these definitions: the year of Jean Hubert Martin’s *Magiciens de la Terre*, of Rasheed Araeen’s *The Other Story*, of the founding of ZKM in Karlsruhe,<sup>15</sup> of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Havana Biennale and of the publication, of R. Rosen and C. Brauer’s *Making their Mark: Women Artists Move into the Mainstream, 1970-1985*. While the first two examples are endlessly quoted, the latter ones are not because 1989 acts as a more general signal of an arbitrary conjunction between two exhibitions related to re-thinking post-colonialism and the black art movement in London and Paris, as well as major political changes across Eastern Europe post-Perestroika and democracy protests in China at Tiananmen Square. In debates about globalisation, the consequences of these political changes emerge in debates about art post-Socialism throughout the 1990s as well as art from the ‘Tiger Economies’ across Asia and the New Economic Zones of China. This periodisation seems rather shaky and crude and, if we want to draw comparisons between decades, then we need to fundamentally re-examine these assumptions. “Postmodernism” exists in many new histories of contemporary art as a term to denote an anachronistic transition in the 1970s and 1980s between two eras: the “modern” and “contemporary”.<sup>16</sup> Postmodernism’s demise, or rather its lack of currency today, reduces it to two tendencies which supposedly did not engage with post-colonialist critique manifest in the 1970s/1980s: the market-driven “return to painting and sculpture” (alternatively Benito Oliva’s trans-avantgarde) and the “anti-

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<sup>15</sup> This institution’s significance in these debates about “global art” is also part of this story given in Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg and Peter Weibel’s work, including their emphasis on separating “global art” from “world art”.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, Terry (2009). *What is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 242.



Aesthetic” in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup> The simultaneous adoption of post-structuralism in Anglophone countries as a method of reading in postmodernism is also overlooked in changing how many now approach interpretations of art as audience, as writers and as curators. Women were not absent from the return to painting and sculpture<sup>18</sup> in a wide variety of countries (Marlene Dumas, Kiki Smith) but the dominant definitions of the women artists in relation to the “anti-aesthetic” draw on a very specific legacy within feminist debates, identifiable as through those named in Craig Owens’ 1983 essay: Mary Kelly, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Dara Birnbaum (with a brief reference to Laurie Anderson).<sup>19</sup> The most cited ‘Other’ women of US Pop Art – Yayoi Kusama, Yoko Ono – widely shown in contemporary art biennales, are followed closely by Louise Bourgeois, Cindy Sherman and Rosemarie Trockel, whose names have appeared most frequently in the top ten of Kunst-Kompass’ 100 artists’ list for over a decade now.<sup>20</sup>

Terry Smith, defining “contemporary art” as a category rather than as simply ‘art made in the contemporary moment’, rightly points to the failure of Western art histories to narrate the post-colonial turn in contemporary art and the need to tackle the conflicting co-temporalities, multiplicity and dislocations evident in biennales and major exhibitions. Moreover, he aligns it with the necessity to engage with “alternative modernities” or “cosmopolitan modernisms” as its

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<sup>17</sup> At the end of *Art After 1900* (Thames and Hudson, 2004) the editors of *October* discuss their strategy for assembling this textbook. Hal Foster asks if the art of the last twenty years (post-1989) has made dysfunctional the very models on which their work as authors has been based: namely the contrast between medium specificity in modernism and an interdisciplinary postmodernism - or models of a historical avant-garde contrasted with a neo-avantgarde that elaborates on the historical avantgarde’s critique of the institution of art (679). While the shift away from modernism has allowed for greater freedom and creativity in approaches, Foster raises the concern that the paradigm of “no-paradigm” contributes to the growing consumerist and touristic culture of contemporary art trends but also to the idea that only local cultures or schools exist which compete against each other, but never become paradigmatic. A certain stagnation or uncertainty is the result.

<sup>18</sup> Deepwell, Katy (2009). ‘Claims for a Feminist Politics in Painting’ in Petersen, Anne Ring et al, (eds.) *Contemporary Painting in Context*. Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, Novo Nordisk Foundation, 139-160.

<sup>19</sup> Owens, Craig (1985). ‘The Discourse of Others’, in Foster, Hal (ed.) *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press.

<sup>20</sup> Kunstkompass survey, 2008. Published in *Manager Magazin*, Germany <http://www.manager-magazin.de>

modernist precursors. These accounts of alternative modernities and modernisms have arisen not just in Europe or America but the Caribbean, South America, Africa and across Asia and Australasia with a focus on the 1960s and 1970s, and political liberation, anti-colonial as well as nationalist, movements of different kinds including opposition to dictatorships.<sup>21</sup> Here, too, increasing attention has been given to few women outside Europe: e.g. Lygia Clark, Amrita Sher-Gil or Atsuko Tanaka (even though they don't fit this agenda). The institutionalisation of tendencies in modernist art education and practice around the world in different schools provoked reassessments and counter-readings of modernism in art, and many are set against emergent nationalisms; producing a range of "neo-", "pre-", "para-" and post-Modern developments from the 1960s-1980s. Smith's solution to tackling this, following Arjun Appadurai,<sup>22</sup> was to focus on "contemporality" and "info-scapes" (or representation)<sup>23</sup> in his three currents: 1) "Retro-Sensationalism"/ "Retro-Avantgarde"/ "Re-Modernism"; 2) the "Post-colonial turn" / Trans-National turn marked by the inclusion of artists from 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> worlds in international art world; and 3) a current of difference as an exploration of "time, place, media and mood today" evident in temporary situational pieces around the world.<sup>24</sup> Smith's last two categories in the local, national and international chime nicely with Malcolm Waters' definition of

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<sup>21</sup> A very few examples of this scholarship include: Enwezor, Okwui (2002). *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, Munich: Museum Villa Stuck; *Century City* Tate Modern, London exhibition (1 February-29 April 2001); Chiu, Melissa and Genocchio, Benjamin (eds.) (2010). *Contemporary Art in Asia: A Critical Reader*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press; Pejic, Bojana and Elliott, David (1999). *After the Wall* Stockholm: Moderna Museet; Giunta, Andrea (2007). *Avant-Garde, Internationalism and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* Durham: Duke University Press. The numerous excellent essays in *Third Text* and *n.paradoxa*. In addition, there are many feminist curators whose exhibitions have attempted to highlight women's work in this story: by Bojana Pejic, Catherine de Zegher, Reiko Kokatsu, Gayatri Sinha, Flaudette May Datuin, Rosa Martinez, Mirjam Westen amongst others.

<sup>22</sup> Appadurai, Arjun 'Difference in the Global Cultural Economy', in Featherstone, Mike (ed.) (1990) *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. Sage: Theory, Culture and Society, 296.

<sup>23</sup> Smith, Terry (2009). *What Is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 255.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?*; Smith, Terry (2012). *Contemporary Art: World Currents*. New Jersey, NJ: Prentice Hall PTR; and his "Introduction" in Smith, Terry, Enwezor, Okwui and Condee, Nancy (eds.) (2009). *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham, USA: Duke University Press, 1-19.

globalisation as an intensification of capitalism in which “material exchanges localise; political exchanges internationalise, and symbolic exchanges globalise”.<sup>25</sup>

In Terry Smith's *Contemporary Art*, feminist art appears in the introduction as a particular grouping amongst the late Modernist movements in Euro-American art which provide the “transitions” to both the trans-national and “retro-avantgarde” (namely, Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Carolee Schneemann).<sup>26</sup> Even though he acknowledges feminist art is not a stylistic movement, nor one confined to the 1960s-1970s, but part of the legacy of art practices defining the contemporary, Smith struggles to situate feminist art within his book, in spite of his positive description of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* as a key “transitional” work.<sup>27</sup> He instead repeats that Mary Kelly herself does not agree with the term “feminist art” – and that this term does not refer to a category of art - but emphasises instead feminist interventions and attention to how art is informed by questions of feminist politics. Instead, the “temporal” in contemporary art is emphasised in terms of an “intense, expansionist, proliferating global sub-culture with its own values and discourse; communicative networks; heroes, heroines, and renegades” but this does not resolve the difficulty posed by 1989 as a transition. Feminist art is not a sub-culture: it is part of contemporary art, however antagonistically and internationally, and has been since the 1960s: it is most often an intervention in art-making in content, in form, in politics and in approach. International feminist shows have been organised since the late 1970s; but this leads us into the competition between ‘internationalism’ as a term and ‘global art’ as synonymous with ‘contemporary’. It is worth also remembering that less than half of the countries in the world actually take part in this “world”: the 88 national pavilions in 2013 at Venice

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<sup>25</sup> Waters, Malcolm (1995). *Globalisation*. London: Routledge, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *Contemporary Art*, 40-43.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. He quotes Lucy Lippard's 1976 statement: ‘Every artist trying to extricate her personal expressions and a universal feminism from the styles and prejudices of a male culture is undertaking a risky and courageous enterprise’ (40). He does not engage however with Kelly's critique of modernism's ‘materiality’, ‘sexuality’ and ‘sociality’ in her critique of conceptualism, feminism and materialism: see Kelly, Mary (1996). ‘Reviewing Modernist Criticism’ [first published in *Screen* 22 no.23 (1981) pp. 41-62, reprinted in Wallis, Brian (ed.) *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: MOCA, 1984)] in *Imaging Desire*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 80-106, quote on 98.

Biennale should be contrasted with the participation of 205 countries in the football FIFA-World Cup.

The ongoing debates about a feminist problematic<sup>28</sup> in contemporary art refer back to feminism as a political movement and a women's art movement (the collective practice of women artists) which now has a long and complex 40 year history. It is a trans-national phenomenon which contains many local/global dynamics as it has proliferated into a worldwide phenomenon, but it is not, nor does it aspire to be, a Universal – as this is a category feminism itself contests. In the 1980s this picture of change in the increasing numbers of professional women artists exhibiting widely did not look so uniform or certain, it had to be reinforced, presented and argued for – in international exhibitions covering more than 30 countries like *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn* (1985) – for example.<sup>29</sup>

In the art world, feminism positioned itself against modernism in two distinct ways: not only a critique of Greenbergian modernism for the sexism of the artists and art critics (and its double standards in the name of quality) but also, its focus on medium-specificity, through the use of an expanded and experimental media in performance, photo-text works, video and installation.<sup>30</sup> The introduction of new content based on women's experiences in the world and of their bodies was a profound challenge to the modernist sealing of art as an exploration of specific media. Work in performance and video, as well as multi-media installations and public art projects which have been a major area of women's art practices and feminist activity since the late 1960s, is often sidelined by these art historical debates about the “contemporary”.

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<sup>28</sup> This term, developed by Kuhn and discussed by Kelly and Griselda Pollock, is about the problem of reading work as feminist: in terms of the intention of its maker, the reading or the context.

<sup>29</sup> Sylvia Eiblmayr, Valie Export, Monika Prischl-Maier (1985). *Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn: Aktuelle Kunst von Frauen Texte und Dokumentation* (Vienna and München). This exhibition brought together 81 artists in the main exhibition, plus 10 further performances by different artists from USA, Germany (East and West), Portugal, Canada, Australia, The Netherlands, Austria, Germany, UK, Italy, France, Switzerland, France, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Japan, former Yugoslavia (Croatia, Slovenia.), Spain, Iceland, Sweden (places where the artists worked, not places of birth).

<sup>30</sup> Lucy R. Lippard's writing is key here: (1975). *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*. New York: Dutton; and (1984). *Get the Message: A Decade of Art for Social Change*. New York: Dutton.

Postmodernism's consequence is now seen only as pluralism, the breaking of Modernism's domination of cultural hegemony in how museums and exhibitions (as well as their subsequent critical and art historical reception) were organised. Feminism's role in this pluralism is always positioned as one of the many competing "identity" politics groups producing the art, but here again the focus on representation and visibility blocks out from view broader political agendas within the women's art movement regarding the reception of works. Race is pitted against gender in these identity politics battles as if it were not the reality that race, class and sex are themselves multiply entwined and mutually implicated. The black art movement in the US and UK had many feminist women artists among it, organising black feminist art exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s: post-colonial discourses have had many feminist contributors. This odd form of token recognition cauterised feminism from its actual presence as a political voice within the green movement, within anti-capitalist protests, and in anti-war, anti-racist, anti-nuclear proliferation movements, setting it apart from any fundamental critique of politics and political protest within socialism, anarchism, and social democratic movements, as well as conservative, nationalist and communist parties with which it had consistently engaged. The renewed focus on democracy movements in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements post-2008 risks repeating the same obliteration of feminist perspectives amongst the boys.

Whatever scene or location in the world is examined, women artists are visible as a substantial part of the contemporary art scene: from Zimbabwe to Kazakhstan. Politically and culturally, the newest tendency is to celebrate the BRIC countries emergence: Brazil, Russia, India and China. Feminism is also part of this scenario. In Eastern Europe and Asia, feminisms and the contention of regressive or emergent forms of feminine (non-) conformity are a major issue in contemporary art and a recurrent theme in women artists' work. This phenomenon is read as "local" interpretations of feminism, or less kindly, as derivative forms of Western feminist examples (given the dominance of the model of American feminist art). All economically successful or highly visible women artists in the market place are stereotypically read against different versions of feminism: either they are strong women (who demonstrate feminism is over) because all women can make it in

today's economy or they are positioned as variants of a flawed feminine (the confessional, the irrational, the absurd) and paraded as the only demonstration that feminism is (again!) not needed because this is what "women" will always be.

### Subject and subjectification?

Theories of globalisation that link economic developments with cultural developments and the alliance of contemporary art with globalisation link a new global order, "global village", a dominant neo-liberalism (evident in the diffuse strategies of multi-national companies or in the movement of people, of goods, of capital across an international marketplace) with "new subjects" for art, drawn from this description of contemporary realities. This alliance between art and the current conditions of globalisation in terms of subject matter through a story of 'modern life' and work patterns - rather than the work of cultural producers from different parts of the world - echoes and repeats dominant theories of Modern art which aligned modernism with modernity (even though the scene has switched from a particular version of monopoly capitalism and a Eurocentric tradition based in Paris to a cosmopolitan set of metropolises - or disaster zones - around the world with no single dominant trading centre). Thus, the dominant representation of the immigrant/ foot-soldier/ common person in 'contemporary art' is overwhelmingly that of the single black man (neither father, husband nor son), in spite of the fact that women of many colours, ethnicities and races have been subject to the same processes and changes brought about by globalisation in the labour market. They too have become refugees, worked as economic migrants, as temporary "fragile" labour in new markets or globally devolved industrial production processes, been exploited in its legal and illegal practices and trafficked across countries in the sex trade or as enslaved domestic servants. The question (so fundamental to Modernism and identical to its relation to modernity also) is whether "contemporary" art's sense of its own and its awareness of this (following Smith) mark it out as "contemporary art" which as even he suggests encourages a slippage in terms between 'modern' as past and 'contemporary' as now?<sup>31</sup> However, it is not just in "new" modern subjects

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<sup>31</sup> Terry Smith's introduction to Smith et al, *Antinomies of Art and Culture*, 7, suggests this repeatedly.

“depicted” or “represented” that contemporary art looks at “contemporaneity”: it is also through explorations of subjectivities in “now” time, unlinked from modernism’s projected future worlds or visions. The real question is whether this refigures, re-conceptualises and reframes these concerns in the forms of the works themselves to offer meaningful insights into widely shared “subjectivities” rather than token representative examples of “difference” in global art shows. Critiques of dictatorships and political oppression, the failings and limits of modern democracies, exercises of power within neo-liberalism, studies of historical injustices/ political traumas, new surveillance techniques, those exploited by multi-national companies, eco-disasters, racism, the tough lives of economic migrants or typical workers in new trades today, the disjunctures or clashes between languages and cultural traditions: all fit the bill as subjects of contemporary art’s more acute work on globalisation, beyond an economic definition. Women artists’ works have addressed every one of these subjects, not just from the margins in alternative venues but in the major Kunsthallen and Biennales of today. They have also examined climate change, pollution, systems of surveillance, how modern communication networks operate or default and how economic and social oppression persists in the high levels of violence against women in war and in peacetime. Feminist critique continues in the approaches and attitudes of these artists and how their works can be theorised but the opportunity to use forty years of analysis which already exists on the subject of feminism is rarely taken by mainstream male critics or curators.

The debates about the feminisation of labour (no longer dominated by manual labour; no longer excluding women by legal or institutional measures; but always ‘precarious and fragile’) emerge along with this surge in women artists’ numbers – seemingly as something “unquantifiable” in relation to women art workers (a romanticism not shared by the World Bank, NGOs or UN Reports). When was it not “precarious” to be a freelance self-employed artist, especially if you don’t have a gallery contract? In some cases, these features of globalisation in the labour of women are explored in the subject of works produced by women cultural producers (Ursula Biemann, Tanja Ostojic), but rarely by men.<sup>32</sup> Their inclusion to more general debates about “labour under capitalism” risks again their

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<sup>32</sup> Dimitrakaki, Angela (2011). ‘Labour, Ethics, Sex and Capital. On Biopolitical Production in Contemporary Art’, *n.paradoxa, Biopolitics* issue. Vol. 28 (July): 5-15.

marginalisation as a peripheral subject (the woman question, again!) and because it is the gendered female who first disappears from view (because the Revolution takes priority over any revolution for women).

As Anne Ring Petersen suggests in *Third Text*, the shifting labels and trends used to discuss contemporary art as “Others” have placed an extraordinary emphasis on ethnic/race difference and on “women” in selecting who are the valued subjects in contemporary art debates.<sup>33</sup> No longer the marginal subject in the ideology of modernism or the culture industry’s/media’s norms: the woman artist in contemporary art is now a visible cultural dominant – a trend. She is symptomatic of what constitutes culture today: generally not-white; part of an ethnic minority or born in a non-Western country; the topics in the work must be problematic and cutting-edge, but, in this “new normal”, her gender does not figure and her feminist politics do not fit the mainstream global definitions of “political subjectivity” which remain male-defined, because they often speak of “women”. As this new example, these women become “Othered” by the very discourses which support them and certain themes evident within their work are no longer discussed. This is why some women artists fit the contemporary art and globalisation bill so perfectly: the substantial and very engaging practices of a range of artists from Mariko Mori, Mona Hatoum, Kim Sooja, Coco Fusco to Tanja Bruguera – while many others don’t. (This prioritisation is not a criticism of the artists or the interest or impact of their work but of the agendas behind why repeatedly some women artists are selected as “obvious” subjects for art historical study in discussions of global art and others are not). Where women artists’ subject is “woman”/“women” or they redeploy recognisably “feminine” elements, they are instead promoted as ‘exceptional’, even occasionally ‘exceptionally feminist’ – an adjective rather than a politics. Contemporary women artists can make big projects, gain significant funding, become selected for national pavilions, have museums established around their work but the principal

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<sup>33</sup> Ring Petersen, Anne (2012). ‘Identity Politics, Institutional Multiculturalism, and the Global Artworld’, *Third Text* Vol. 26, Issue 2: 195-204. See, for example, as a feminist intervention in this model, the selection of women artists from 1990s from across 4 continents as part of *Rebelle : Art and Feminism 1969-2009* (Arnhem, 2009) curated by Mirjam Westen, were deliberately contrasted with artists from 1970s from Euro-America, with a focus on Dutch artists. See Deepwell, Katy ‘Interview with Mirjam Westen, curator of REBELLE: Kunst & Feminisme, 1969-2009’ *n.paradoxa* Vol. 24 (July 2009): 22-29.



point that women artists have arrived in large numbers remains invisible. The press and publicity mechanisms for promotion and presentation of their work (even in art history!) mean that these women can only become 'exceptional' while their presence as part of the "new normal" (the "not-All") remains unremarked and rendered unremarkable.

Instead, the fascination with Negri and Hardt's *Empire* and a critique of spectacle in late consumer capitalism post-Baudrillard, post-Virilio - where symbolic exchange and the dispersion of knowledge into micro-worlds of taste or preference are everything - take over at this point as the economic "background" to the contemporary world. Gender analysis is not used in these writers' analyses of the contemporary condition, nor is their own positioning marked by gender (the male is the only norm for humanity, again). Meanwhile debates about the character of contemporary art continue to be extended by engagements with psychoanalysis and philosophy through critiques of Enlightenment thought - drawing diversely on French post-structuralist and post-Frankfurt school approaches and a so-called "philosophical turn". Modern Philosophy - characterised by its extreme use of masculine heroes but an itinerant "she" in the text - readily displays these tendencies when it turns to discussing contemporary art. The 'philosophical turn' is reproducing and reintroducing the selective tradition with its full force of masculinism all over again<sup>34</sup> as the artists are repeatedly only men and feminist philosophers are not discussed. Since each text gives value only to the subject it explores (and these are only men), sexism becomes a quantitative problem of silence on the practices of women artists and feminist philosophy. The philosophical return marches a retreat in the defence of an avant-garde - minimalist, conceptual - as a last bastion for defending a territory in which the numbers and presence of women artists goes unnoticed because it is not even detected as a subject of interest.<sup>35</sup> Constructing frameworks

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<sup>34</sup> In Avanesian, Armen, and Skrebowski Luke (eds.) (2012). *Aesthetics and Contemporary Art*. Berlin: Sternberg Press only one contribution by Juliane Rebentisch mentions the names of a few women artists in her critique of Badiou. No other women artists appear as examples or name mentions in any other discussions by contributing philosophers/cultural theorists. Feminist philosophies are not discussed but rendered absent. Only men count in this book.

<sup>35</sup> Cliché, Danielle et al (eds.) (2001). *Pyramid or Pillars: Unveiling the Status of Women in Arts and Media Professions in Europe* Germany: ARCult Media/ERICarts/ZfKf. Report on the visual arts in Austria, Finland, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the UK finds women artists' presence at between 38%-45% of all artists, 30-60% of art students, 3%-20%

in which the woman artist disappears from view is hardly a new preoccupation. Modernism excelled in such mechanisms of marginalisation: it created women artists as the “exception”.

### Productive Undoing

These processes require a “productive undoing” which can only be done by ‘attention’ [which displaces] belief onto the terrain of the imagination,[as we] attempt to access the epistemic’ - as Gayatri Spivak puts it:-

“Globalisation takes place only in capital and class. Everything else is damage control. Information command has ruined knowing and reading. Therefore we don’t really know what to do with information. Unanalyzed projects come into existence simply because the information is there. Crowd sourcing takes the place of democracy. Universities become adjuncts to what is called international civil society; the humanities and imaginative social sciences bite the dust. At this point, some of us remind ourselves that the legacy of the European Enlightenment is Doubt. Hope (or lack of hope) and sentimental nationalism (or sentimental postnational globalism) are where much of our world stands now.”<sup>36</sup>

Here, hope is for an autonomy of art – not as defined by media (Greenberg’s formulation) - but through the humanities’ examination of works imaginatively offering critical insights into the human condition which will enable us to see ourselves differently. This is a project of possibilities<sup>37</sup> that feminism has been engaged with since the 1960s, even in fact, since Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949) in its insistence on gender as a difference in human subjectivity. Difference is not simply acknowledging or recognising Others, it requires an openness to the fundamental transformation of categories, approaches, ideas, concepts, and frameworks: the exception contains the ability to

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of lecturers and professors. For a picture in the USA, see ‘Women Artists: 1990-2005’ National Endowment of the Arts report (2005) <http://www.arts.gov/research/Notes/96.pdf> [last accessed June 2013] which concludes women artists are 46% of all artists but remain significantly under-represented.

<sup>36</sup> Spivak, Gayatri (2012) “Introduction”, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Braidotti, Rosi (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

disrupt canons and chronologies and accepted ways of thinking but so does attention to the “not-All”, the common and unspoken left out of the frame.

Why is this task of ‘productive undoing’ for this seamless text important? Perhaps it will enable feminist readings to be used more widely and to develop the complex relationships between women artists which are not immediately visible. To think as the curators of *ReAct Feminism* have done in building an archive of feminist performance artworks which have a relationship to contemporary works and are also the subjects of re-performances by younger women artists.<sup>38</sup> Or as Mirjam Westen, did in her exhibition *Rebelle*, or Bojana Pejic in *Gender Check* and *Good Girls*,<sup>39</sup> start to show the complex interactions between generations and geographies in feminism in the last forty years, not the last twenty. Or as Monica Amor, in contrasting Gego and Hesse, proposed we might try to reach an “understanding of neighbouring modernities mediated by artists’ common interests and by artistic strategies of aesthetic redefinition”.<sup>40</sup> Or, in the 500+ articles, I have edited and published by many women writers in *n.paradoxa*, look at feminism in relation to contemporary art since the 1970s for these connections transnationally and inter-generationally and in different parts of the world? Why don’t we learn more about the relationship between Siri Derkert working in the mid-1960s on her drawings of feminist poets sandblasted into concrete for Stockholm’s underground station, Östermalmstorg, where her assistant, the young artist Monica Sjoo, chooses to develop as a feminist painter in the 1970s and helps initiate the feminist art movement in the UK? Or we might gain a more radical understanding of Japanese feminism by contrasting generationally Mitsuko Tabé’s remarkable feminist work *Artificial Placenta / Jinko Taiban* (1961) (which now exists in a reconstruction, 2004) shown in 1961 at the Kyusha-Ha exhibition, Ginza Gallery, Japan, with an early feminist performance in Paris by Yoko Todo in 1975 as a Coca-Cola smoking geisha girl, which Todo also “recycled” into *Unknown Ideal* (2009-2011), a two screen video installation,

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<sup>38</sup> *ReActFeminism* website and exhibitions plus tours <http://reactfeminism.org> for *Re.Act.Feminism: A Performing Archive* (2008-2009), (2011-2013).

<sup>39</sup> Westen, Mirjam (ed. and curator) (2009) *Rebelle: Kunst en feminisme 1969-2009*. Arnhem Gemeentemuseum; and Pejic, Bojana (ed. and curator) (2009). *Gender Check*. Vienna: MUMOK and Erste Foundation.

<sup>40</sup> Amor, Monica ‘On the Contingency of Modernity and the Persistence of Canons’, in Smith et al, *Antinomies*, 83.

setting these photos against images of her recent paintings. These last two examples expand the project of contemporary art as an exchange between women artists from the 1960s into the present where feminism is central to practice. The task for feminism continues to be important in finding a symbolisation for that which cannot be symbolised in the current hegemonic order.<sup>41</sup> Many possibilities have arisen in feminist theory in the last 40 years about how to do this – too many to begin to outline here<sup>42</sup>– but if 1989 remains the date for the start of “contemporary” art and scholars continue to sideline feminist writing on contemporary art because it represents only “exceptions” or the “not-All” of no interest or relation to its main agendas, this will not happen.

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<sup>41</sup> Contrast for example: Lamoni, Giulia (2013). “African masks, family photographs and open suitcases: Rosana Paulino, Mónica de Miranda and Maimuna Adam”, pp. 5-14; and Layiwola, Peju (2013), “From Footnote to Main Text: Re/Framing Women Artists from Nigeria”, pp. 78-87; both in *n.paradoxa* Vol. 31 (January).

<sup>42</sup> Look, for example, at the 1000+ resources for books, websites and journals on feminism in *n.paradoxa*'s online database. [www.ktpress.co.uk](http://www.ktpress.co.uk). As the founder and editor of *n.paradoxa*, I have published over 500 articles from more than 80 countries developing this idea of a transnational/international debate about contemporary women artists and readings of their work in relation to feminist theory.

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