

Feminism and Art Curatorial Practice

BY RENEE BAERT

The influence of feminism in my life and in my practice as a curator has shifted emphasis considerably over the years, in a way that is doubtless consistent with some of the developments within feminism itself. Overall, what it comes down to for me is how feminism reshapes what we understand, and even undertake, in the domain of knowledge.

To grow up female in a patriarchal society is to be encouraged to perceive oneself as one who never “knows,” since one’s knowledge, experience and insight are not socially valorized. God is male, the Father is the Law, and knowledge is ever someplace else. As Simone de Beauvoir put it so succinctly: “A man is in the right in being a man: it is woman who is in the wrong.”¹ In such a social structure, to be “the one who does not know” becomes a virtual ontological condition of femaleness.

Where for Hamlet, the Oedipal prince, the question of existence is framed as “to be, or not to be,” for women in patriarchy, where female silence and invisibility are the norms, and where an insistence on the specificities of a female selfhood still encounters social proscriptions, the problem might be framed as “to be, is to not-be, to not-be is to be.”

The feminist movement has intervened in this status quo in several ways. It has subjected a heritage of “knowledge” in discipline after discipline to a radical critique predicated on other organizations of meaning and value. It has recuperated the contributions of women “lost” from history. It has provided a social ground from which to develop a positive concept of female “difference.” And it has provided a space in which to invent and enact symbolic, theoretical and material practices that are alternatives to the dominant codes. The personal is political, but as Rosi Braidotti puts it, “the personal is also theoretical.”²

When I am working, I don’t fully “know” what I’m doing. I am usually struck by something in a work of art, or make a connection between works of art, that stimulates a process of thinking. I already bring to this moment certain interpretive, or experiential, or theoretical frameworks, but these by no means “contain” the work. Rather, the curatorial project is a way of working through certain questions, of learning through a process of researching and writing, in an effort to articulate the particular connections I am in the process of making, and extending.

In *Enchantment/Disturbance*, the process began when I was asked to speak on a public panel on art and politics. I agreed to do so, but said that I would speak about “enchantment.” What influenced this statement was a quote I had read by Joseph Beuys: “In universities, where everyone is so rational, sometimes it is necessary for an enchanter to appear.”³ I was interested to consider what would constitute a *political* practice predicated on

the experience of “enchantment,” rather than the privileged critical strategies of rupture and negation. I found I wanted to pursue this question still further, curatorially: to consider pleasure as a “capture” rather than a gratification and dispersal. To this question I brought my experiences as a spectator in relation to particular works of art, which had prepared me to address the visceral and emotional stresses of given works, elements that remained largely unaccounted for in critical discourse. I was interested in works which led one to wonder, in the double sense of being wonderful and leading one to inquire and question. I was not surprised to find this doubled language, which both occupied the conventions of discourse and exceeded its privileging of the rational, largely in the work of women artists, who predominated in the exhibition.

In my most recent exhibition, *Legitimation*, the process began with viewing a particular work. This piece by Jamelie Hassan had evident correspondences with new work being developed by Anne Ramsden, in that both artists questioned representational practices within the museum. I was interested in extending these connections through the introduction of a third work, and I continued to research the “missing link” until I viewed a new piece by Nell Tenhaaf that did not deal with the museum at all! The process of working the preliminary connections, together with the work I was viewing, had led me away from a concentration on the museum as a site into a broader area: that of the feminist interrogation of discourses of knowledge and legitimation. The framing of the exhibition focused on these interventions into the discourse of museology (Ramsden), of anthropology (Hassan) and of science and technology (Tenhaaf).

Prior to the emergence of a feminist discourse, I was a person who did not “know.” With feminism, I am still a person who does not “know.” But there is a world of difference between the experiences. In the former, it was ever that the centre of knowledge lay, by definition, elsewhere. Through feminism, I am critically aware of the contingencies of knowledge, and of the necessity of interrogating, as women, what we are led to “know,” and of actively engaging in producing other forms of knowledge. This is a collective project.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Knopf, 1952).

² Rosi Braidotti, “The Politics of Ontological Difference,” in *Between Feminism & Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London: Routledge, 1989).

³ Caroline Tisdale, *Joseph Beuys* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979).



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Sources: J.M. Charcot