KERRY GREAVES

Art History's Feminist Emergency

Over the last decade, as the disputes surrounding socially engaged art have been historicized, the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis have hit, and the global circuitry of biennials and art fairs has peaked, not to mention the crises brought on by Black Lives Matter, far right nationalisms, and now a global pandemic, there has been a renewed urgency regarding the relevance—and precarity—of art history as a discipline (Grant and Price 2020, Joselit 2020, Petrovich 2020, Mirzoeff 2020, Bishop 2020). Like art history, feminism, too, finds itself at a crossroads and facing new challenges in a post #metoo but ever more highly segregated global economy, which was recently described at a major international conference as our "feminist emergency" of today.[1] Both feminism and art history are independent, broad fields encompassing a range of ideas and approaches. As art historians Victoria Horne and Lara Perry have emphasized, if feminism "designates political organizing and activities aimed towards transforming the asymmetrical gendered relations that structure historical, legal, economic and social systems," art history addresses historical and contemporary cultural practices, especially those dealing with art production, the market, criticism, and institutions (2017, 2). Their different aims aside, feminism and feminist theory have long struggled to maintain a degree of agency within art history. After the so-called "second wave" feminist movement infiltrated the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s, a certain taking for granted has haunted feminism's position within art history, a phenomenon several scholars have recently sought to elucidate (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2015, Grant 2011, Horne and Perry 2017). While informative and necessary, none of these investigations consider the Nordic region.

Taking these issues into account, this article contemplates my research of the last four years within the Nordic context to explore how and why feminism has been relatively left out of the deliberations concerning the state of art history today.[2] I address what I see as the paradigmatic feminist double-bind within art history: a dual tension between feminism's status as historical movement and tendency to be historicized, versus its function as critical theory and activism, by looking at the Danish case.

[1] The *Camp tableaux* from the exhibition *Damebilleder*, 10-24 April 1970, Rådskælderen, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, and Trefoldigheden, Den Frie Udstilling, Copenhagen. Pictured are the artists Birgitte Skjold Jensen, Jytte Rex, Marie Bille, Rikke Diemer, Lene Bille, Kirsten Dufour, and their children.

Drawing upon the identification of some larger patterns within Danish art history and the detailed problematics of feminist art history's double bind, I argue that feminism is germane to art history—and to its future. By reflecting on a recent feminist art historical endeavor, the international conference *Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present* at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, the following offers some ideas on how a feminist art historical approach can make a constructive and crucial contribution to the field and the issues it faces today.

Waves and (re)surfacing

During the emergence of feminism as an organized social and political movement in the Nordic countries in the latter half of the 1970s, feminist art and art made by women generally aligned with wider international developments, in which gender difference became a crucial category in the creating and understanding of art, and artists focused primarily on issues of visibility, activism, performance, and the female body. Like their counterparts in the United States and Europe, Danish artists such as Ursula Reuter Christiansen (b. 1943), Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943), Lene Adler Petersen (b. 1944), and Jytte Rex's (b. 1942) critical engagement with feminism informed their expansion of traditional forms of artistic media, processes, exhibitions, and training. This engagement also led to a radical rethinking of issues related to representation, identity, and sexuality both within and outside the art world. With their artwork and cultural activism, these artists and their colleagues also organized and partook in, among others, two landmark feminist interventions into Danish culture: *Damebilleder* (Images of Women), 1970 **[1]**—one of the first feminist exhibitions in the world—and *Kvindeudstillingen XX* (Women's Exhibition XX), 1975, a festival-like showcase that featured readings, discussions, and works by international and local artists and non-artists alike.[3]

[2] Installation shot of the recreation of *Damebilleder* in the exhibition *What's Happening?*, 25 March-2 August 2015, curated by Birgitte Anderberg at the Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen.

The activism, art works, and exhibitions produced during the "second wave" feminist period in Denmark were well documented, which has come in handy for the relatively few but important art historical revisitations in the literature.[4] The first moment when this occurred was around the early 2000s, and then again about ten years later. Two of the most important examples are *View: Feminist Strategies in Danish Visual Art* (2004), produced by the artists' collective Women Down the Pub, and a major retrospective exhibition at the Statens Museum for Kunst, *What's Happening?*, 2015 **[2]**, and its catalogue. These feminist interventions into art history and the art museum have been accompanied by a handful of volumes that either took the form of thematic journal issues seeking to introduce international feminist art theory to the Danish context (Vest Hansen 1999, Jørgensen 2003) or assessments of the local artistic landscape in feminist and representational terms (Høyer Hansen 2005, Jørgensen 2015).

Despite the groundbreaking work done by women artists in Denmark in the 1970s and 1980s and the few significant critical studies that address feminist art in the local context in the decades thereafter, a more sustained critical dialogue about the issues they provoked did not occur. What is notable is the way in which such art historical attention to the subject seems to *resurface* periodically but not consistently. In Denmark, this was originally at the time in the 1970s and 1980s, then at the turn of the 2000s, then about a decade later, each time with a new generation of art historians becoming aware of art history's feminist currents. But while each generation grappled with issues of visibility and representation, there was no wider, sustained attention and impact.

The sporadic attention to feminism and art made by women in Danish art history over the last fifty years is borne out by the numbers. In Denmark, several studies have attested to the lack of impact of feminist activism on reshaping art institutions. In 2005, a Ministry of Culture report documented that 80% of the artworks by living artists acquired by the seven state-owned Danish art museums from 1983 to 2003 were by male artists, while 95% of works purchased by deceased artists were by men (*Redegørelse* 2005 and Christensen 2016, 349-50). In 2016, scholar Hans Dam Christensen assessed the representation of women in Danish museums from 2005-2012. Even though more female than male artists trained in art schools during that time, the disparity of representation persisted: of exhibitions of living artists at Denmark's National Gallery, the Statens Museum for Kunst, eighteen featured men, with only five with women, while the sixty-eight major exhibitions it curated included only five solo shows featuring women (358). Despite the continued imbalance, little debate followed, except for the Danish state's consultant board, Akademiraadet (Academy Council), to advise museums not to be limited by gender but to aim to represent Danish art history in all its nuances (Christensen 2016, 252-53).[5] In November 2019, the Association of Danish Museums (ODM) published the results of a study which showed that female artists accounted for just 22% of the works Danish art collections acquired in 2004-2019, and just 29% of solo exhibitions featured women artists ("Facts" 2020).[6]

The lack of female representation in art institutions reflects a general inattention to the issue of feminism and gender inequality in art history and art criticism. My use of the surfacing metaphor above is deliberate: surfacing provides a related yet distinct alternative to the wave model—a predominant framework for understanding feminism for decades—for thinking anew about feminist art history as it has actually unfolded over time. The wave denotes a feminism that consists of several forward moving, cumulative, regular, decisive historical moments. Surfacing, in contrast, conjures coming up for air after the wave has crested and troughed. Surfacing involves effort, oxygenation, rising up, survival, buoyancy, and being made visible while in constant danger of being re-subsumed and made invisible again. Since the 1970s, Danish feminist art history has (re)surfaced, but only temporarily and sporadically between wider silences.

This pattern was already referenced by art historian Sanne Kofod Olsen in her 2004 *View* essay, when she lamented:

> Why we are sitting here in 2004 with the same dilemma we had 35 years ago is a paradox. The women's movement and feminism have shifted borders but, as regards to the writing of art history there is still a palpable disparity of representation of the sexes in the visual arts that remains inexplicable (196).

At the time of this writing almost twenty years on, and despite the efforts of the aforementioned texts and exhibitions, in Denmark the situation remains relatively unchanged.

Feminism and art history/historiography

What are we to make of this silence and resurfacing in a country that has built a national image out of gender equality? The problem is not simply a Danish or Nordic one, but present throughout Anglo-European art history and its related institutions. In their book *Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions*, art historians Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry document how over the past 40 years, as feminism has become more visible within institutions, it has "lost its bite" and been unable to succeed in affecting sustainable change (3). One reason they posit for this is that museums and galleries tend to relinquish their responsibility for creating a comprehensive feminist agenda, instead looking to external art historians to undertake the work for them (180). Reflecting feminism's double bind of historicism and activism, my own experience with Danish art institutions similarly suggests that feminism presents a dual problem: it is either viewed as representing a dated and completed activist project no longer relevant for the art of today, or its activist associations appear too threatening or alienating—something feminist art historian Griselda Pollock describes as a trauma—for institutions to attract their publics (2016).[7]

While Nordic art history's feminist silences betray blind spots and missed opportunities in ways that reflect trends elsewhere, the Nordic case is still revealing for the field. If Nordic artists created radical feminist art and undertook subversive activist projects concurrently with their international sisters, they did so within the framework of the welfare state, where gender equality and the common good have been upheld as longstanding national values. And yet, even within this seemingly favorable environment, the equality for many women has been far from achieved, both within society at large, but also within the feminist movement itself. Feminist scholar Mia Liinason has recently illuminated the discrepancy between the image of Nordic gender eqity and reality. She has documented how Nordic goverments have capitalized on the idea of gender equality by constructing it as an essential national value: emphasizing women's "abilities as caregivers and responsible actors (in the early 1900s), as self-realizing and emancipated individuals (in the 1960s), and as efficient and responsible actors (in the 2000s) (19)." In the process, gender equality was exploited as a neoliberal strategy for modernizing Scandinavian societies during the emergence of the welfare state.

While the increase in Nordic women's rights is undeniable and significant, Liinason highlights through intersectional analysis how notions of congruity, inclusion, and difference, were (and are) used strategically to communicate a sense of well-being of the nation, while at the same time replicating other forms of exclusion and hierarchy that persist in excluding certain women not seen as desirable by neo-liberalism, such as migrants and ethnic minorities (2018, 4-11). Indeed, feminism has been increasingly criticized for repeating structures of exclusion and inclusion in terms of race, class and sexual identity (Horne and Perry 2017, 4). And as feminist philosopher Nancy Fraser has argued in the case of the welfare state, the exploitation of gender equality in nation building is in fact a side effect of an increasing alignment with privatization, deregulation, and neo-liberalism (2009). These circumstances have also had an impact on art historical narratives and historiography in significant, but not immediately visible ways. Many of the feminist artists of the 1970s, for example, were Marxist in outlook and critical of the capitalist compromises of the welfare system, but their exhibitions and works have nonetheless been later instrumentalized as evidence of the success of liberal democracy (Greaves 2022).

It becomes clear that within art history, the contours of the continued issue of gender inequality and feminism's unrealized potential have been overshadowed—perhaps even partially caused—by the perceived image of the egalitarian Nordic welfare state. As a result, a disconnect has persisted that has prevented the radical and speculative potential of feminist theory and approaches from effectively infiltrating the Nordic art world and its history. The resulting implicit view has been that there is little need to reconsider women artists in terms of their gender since they have already achieved equality and have been treated democratically; this has even generated the idea that gender is a *dépassé* topic altogether.[8]

Indeed, except for some notable exceptions by art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Dimitrakaki, the taking for granted of feminism's role within art history—as either historical moment or already completed activist project—has hindered feminist theory from being consistently deployed as a vigorous approach within the field (2018). Historian Judith M. Bennett has documented how history has been problematic for feminism, arguing for renewed and sustained historical scrutiny: "feminism is impoverished by an inattention to history. By broadening our temporal horizons, we can produce both better feminist history and better feminist theory" (2006, 31).[9] These conflicting paradigms suggest that it is actually feminism's *history* that holds the potential to reanimate feminism within art history. In their recent volume *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, Horne and Perry have made crucial inroads in this respect with their call for rehabilitated attention to history and historiography to reactivate feminism in the discipline, and thereby, art history itself. They argue that a critical, sustained revisiting of feminist art history and its periodic absences is necessary if we are to begin using feminist theory effectively for addressing art and its histories now:

> [The] critical and revolutionary feminist dimension enjoins us to look to the present and future and break with the patriarchal past; while the art historical process demands that we review and reflect on our relations with that which has gone before. [...] to do justice to both impulses: to formulate a politics for the present and future, which acknowledges, but does not reduce us to, the past (2017, 2).

They continue:

> The writing of art history ... emerged as a critical site for intervening within the production of modern subjectivities and related historical operations of dominance and exploitation. [...] We must continue to ask how we can understand and write about the past and present of art in a manner that does not simply recuperate women and feminism to established circuits of meaning- and value-production. But this requires that as these circuits evolve, so should our tools (7).

These scholars provide a poignant reminder of the critical importance of actively addressing feminism's history and its historiography as a means for realizing the activist potential of feminism and feminist theory to redress art history as a field—one that is capable of reflecting and critiquing the myriad global urgencies we are faced with living in the world today. In this respect, historicizing feminist art history is not a process of neutralization and distancing, but of empowerment and active engagement. It is a process that Horne and Perry describe as a "disruptive renarration" that "aims to displace the viscous canonical history that insistently coheres a singular sense of the feminist art movement [...] to avoid producing corrective accounts, in favor of historical accounts that struggle with 'alternative ways of telling feminist stories'" (16).[10]

When we write art's history, we must do so in a manner that self-reflexively acknowledges historiography's double operation, in which history actively informs the present, while the present informs our understanding of history. Such attention, moreover, allows for a greater capacity for applying feminism, its histories and theories, as a presciently critical and activist tool for reapproaching, rewriting, and re-theorizing art history as a discipline relevant to its present moment.

Feminist futures

The above-cited concerns informing art history's feminist emergency were at the forefront of the international conference I organized in November 2021, *Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present* at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk. Produced as part of the research project *Feminist Emergency: Women Artists in Denmark, 1960-Present* at the University of Copen-

hagen and its related *Nordic Feminist Art Histories Research Network, Fast Forward* unfolded with a specific understanding of feminism not only as a series of historical interventions, but also a critical position of unsettling, or experimental critical inquiry to challenge forms of representation as well patriarchal power and its institutions. In building the program, I attempted to address and catalyze the ideas, spirit, and activities of earlier generations in a manner reflecting Griselda Pollock's assertion that feminism's mission is to formulate a new political subjectivity in the world and creative space of difference that qualifies the project of democratization and emancipation (Pollock and Dimitrikaki 2018). Feminism thus functioned as a critical and speculative guiding force, even when applied to feminist history itself, and by necessity the conference included other marginalized modalities of identity such as class, race, ethnicity, queerness, and sexuality, with a focus on how these interact with structures of power to inform artists' works, environments, practices, and identities. With such an intersectional attitude, it was therefore surprising when we were told by Louisiana staff that the original title of the conference, "Feminist Futures," was too academic and alienating to draw a wide audience. Hence the original title, "Feminist Futures," disappeared, and "Fast Forward" took its place. But the contents of the program nonetheless continued to reflect an emphasis on open-ended, creative, self-reflexive and concentrated close-looking, in contrast to speeding ahead.

If a robust feminist approach remains rocky terrain for the art world, the very concept of "woman" is itself also problematic—the double binds encasing feminism and women, it seems, never end. The conference needed a concise and identifiable title, thus, "Women in European Art, 1970-Present" was chosen. But in doing so, there was a danger in uncritically grouping all (but historically white and educated) female artists together in ways that could be read as anti-feminist. We nevertheless understood the concept "woman" as women, plural and lowercase, not singular capital, and a signifier for multiple and shifting identities, even while acknowledging the word's significant limitations in being able to address every female, queer, lesbian, and trans woman. Indeed, as Pollock has shown, woman is not only biological essence, but a political identity: to be a woman has different socio-political ramifications in society and her very presence calls into question and challenges the premises of the patriarchy at every level (Pollock and Dimitrakaki 2018).

The conference sought to reconsider the generational framework of historical "waves," which has been so decisive for feminist art historical scholarship, to explore how the circulations and translations of this model have shaped art and its discourses and institutions across Europe since 1970. A range of twenty-one presentations and four keynotes reconsidered and introduced historical subjects and presented new research, methodological approaches, and issues in the form of theoretical contributions, historical scholarship, curatorial work, and performances. The program, which also included exhibition tours at both Louisiana and the Statens Museum for Kunst, was divided over two days with the following thematic sections: historical feminist foundations in Denmark; Pia Arke and Nordic colonialism; new/alter histories; migration, politics, and activism; feminist critical consciousness and invisibility, and feminism and inter/media experiments. Within each section, care was given to create a varied texture of disciplines, subjects, and approaches, alternating between performances and more standard academic papers.

We felt it was important to open the conference by revisiting the canonical feminist works and interventions of the 1970s with a session that introduced new ways of seeing them, as well as formerly unknown works such as an experimental short film by artist Mette Aarre (b. 1943). These presentations reinvigorated a dialogue with younger scholars working on more contemporary art, while also introducing Denmark's little-known, but incredibly radical experiments to an international audience. One pioneering artist of the period even contributed when Ursula Reuter Christiansen screened her watershed feminist film *The Executioner*, 1971, after which she spoke at length about it and her experiences. Several other conference presentations further emphasized the importance of historical engagement by critically reconsidering historical figures, works, and practices throughout Europe, as well as the nature of writing art's histories itself, shedding fresh light on those arenas in the process.

Current acute problems relevant to art history now were likewise crucial to the conference, and we sought to apply the agitational impulse initiated in the 1970s to address issues related to Nordic (de)colonialism, (post)migration, ecology, and neoliberal labor, such as visibility, representation, Black identity, queerness, indigeneity, and activism. Some of the highlights of these sessions came from the artists themselves, such as visionary Greenlandic artist Jessie Kleemann (b. 1959), who held the audience spellbound with her playful, critical performance exploring the function of Skibskiks (naggu-teeqqat), plain biscuits with a long colonial history. Danish-Korean artist Jane Jin Kaisen (b. 1980), meanwhile, spoke about and partially screened her intensely moving 2019 film *Community of Parting*, which was informed by her participation in an international women's delegation that crossed the border between North and South Korea and her ongoing commitment to communities affected by war and division. Southern Sámi artist Carola Grahn's (b. 1982) lively and mischievous reading from her novel *The Journey* (2020) transported the audience into the being of the *nåitien* (Sámi shaman), exploring an animated universe where every entity has its own consciousness but is connected to one wholeness. And Danish artist Henriette Heise (b. 1965) spoke about the politics of (in)visibility facing women artists and the facets of uselessness through a lyrical conversation with art historian Mathias Danbolt.

The keynotes further reflected the dual historical/activist aims of the conference, with captivating talks by Tania Ørum, Maura Reilly, Angela Dimitrakaki, and Amelia Jones, who tackled no less than: the activist experience of the 1970s; a searing indictment on the international and Nordic art worlds' lack of equality between the sexes; the instrumentalizing of feminism and conditions of gender violence and privilege within neoliberalism, and the problematic manner in which "woman" reinscribes the binary thinking that feminism seeks to deconstruct, respectively.

The selection and experience of the contributions to the *Fast Forward* conference was an agonistic exercise in bridge-building, omission-addressing, silence-answering, and activist-historicism-activism. It reflected a fundamentally intersectional and dialogical approach that balanced a reflexive historical criticality in parallel with a determined reckoning with the art world's perilous present. Building on a special Nordic focus, the we attempted to create renewed discourse among various generational, racial, class, disciplinary, and national divides. As a vigorous intervention into art history's feminist emergency, the hope is that the conversations and dialogue it initiated not only create a fuller understanding of why feminism is crucial for art history's future, but also how and why we do art and art history in the first place.

NOTES

1 See "Feminist Emergency," at Birkbeck College on 15 June 2017. Last accessed 31 March 2022. https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/feminist-emergency.

2 These include the two research projects I have led: *Otherwise: Women Artists in Denmark, 1900-1960* and *Feminist Emergency: Women Artists in Denmark*, 1960-Present (both funded by the Novo Nordisk Foundation) at the University of Copenhagen and their main outputs thus far, namely the anthology *Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1960*, ed. Kerry Greaves (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), and the international conference *Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present* at the Louisiana Museum of Modern art, 17-18 November 2021.

3 For more on these exhibitions see Anderberg 2015 and Women Down the Pub 2004.

4 In Danish art history in general, meanwhile, reassessments of women artists before 1960 are minimal. See my "Introduction," in Greaves 2021, 3-12.

5 About the persistence of inequality see Hansen 2005.

6 These statistics are consistent, despite some promising attempts to address the situation, including the 2020 decision of the Council for Visual Arts in the City of Copenhagen to impose gender quotas on the purchase of art for the municipality.

7 According to Pollock, feminism functions as trauma because "it emerges repeatedly as a contestation of the

entire symbolic and imaginary orders of meaning and subjectivity. For this reason it is profoundly traumatic to its own core and potential subjects." (2016, 27).

8 For just one example of this, in the Norwegian context, see Åsebø 2021.

9 Also cited in Horne and Perry 2017, 4.

10 Here Horne and Perry cite Clare Hemmings's study *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminism* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

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