

FROM FEMALE CREATIVITY TO PRACTICES OF FEMINISM: SEVERAL WOMEN'S INITIATIVES IN AUSTRIA

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I will start by introducing one of the first women's initiatives in the arts—in fact the very first exhibition of women artists in Europe organized in 1975 by Vienna-based artist VALIE EXPORT. At that time, the prevalent phrasing was “female creativity,” which was the very subject of her investigation and presentation. Developing a case-study of a contemporary initiative, will allow me to discuss the activities of a forum of young female artists, likewise based in Vienna, that gathered in 2001 in order to explore and expand “practices of feminism” in the arts. The loose collective *a room of one's own* operated as an open structure that undertook, among other activities, research, actions, and collective presentations, up until 2005. It is not my objective to simply juxtapose two initiatives, but rather to provide an analysis of the texts published by the initiators of the two projects and to take a closer look at different approaches and methodologies used in the 1970s and today. What has a younger generation learned from their predecessors? Taking up a question from this paper, I would also like to ask, how they have implemented the legacy of feminist practices into their own aesthetic practices. I will also mention two other examples.

I. Female Creativity

VALIE EXPORT is a self-declared “media artist”—this was an important statement for an artist to make in the 1970s—and she is nowadays broadly considered a pioneer in this regard both in cinematic and video practices.

‘Facing a Family’ (1971) is a decisive work by EXPORT that the artist defined as an “expanded movie,” a “TV action,” and an “imaginary screen,” as stated by the artists in her “concept” or “storyboard” of this work. It was commissioned by Austrian national television (ORF-Austrian Broadcasting Corporation) and broadcast on February 28, 1971, within the scope of a TV series called “Kontakte” (contacts). The topic being addressed was “Family and TV-Isolation.” VALIE EXPORT described the piece in its storyboard:

“Facing a Family. TV-Action. Two families sit face-to-face, one in a TV set, the other at home. No program is visible since the screen that one family is looking at is also the screen of the other [the specification canvas being transmitted to the TV]. What one sees is the reaction to the program [my emphasis]. This reaction, in turn, is the same as in the audience, since the reaction of this family still/also represents a program for the other family. The whole thing can last some 5–20 minutes. Television in the family; the family in television.”¹

¹ VALIE EXPORT, *Facing a Family* (1971), text on the concept of the work. Original quote: “facing a family. tv-aktion. zwei familien sitzen sich gegenüber, eine im tv-apparat, die andre in der wohnung. zu sehen ist nicht das programm, weil der schirm, auf den die eine familie schaut auch der schirm der anderen ist (spezifikation leinwand aufs tv übertragen), sondern die reaktion auf das programm. diese reaktion ist aber wiederum dieselbe im publikum, weil die reaktion dieser familie auch/dennoch ein programm für die familie ist. Das ganze kann etwa von 5-20 minuten dauern. fernsehen in der familie, familie im fernsehen.” Generali Foundation Collection, Vienna.

² VALIE EXPORT: *Women's Art*, in: *Neues Forum 228, Vienna 1973*, p. 47.
³ *Ibid.*

EXPORT started her approach to critical studies and the analysis of television quite early. In ‘Facing a Family’ she investigated the coding of reality and its perception through an electronic medium, e.g. television, that depicts and represents reality for a large audience. The screen functions for EXPORT as an imaginary canvas and represents the interface between the subject's experience of separation and difference. EXPORT mirrored the typical post-World-War-II, middle class family: parents with their children (one boy, one girl), sitting at the dinner table in front of or—as the artist emphasizes—in one of the most important symbols of the ‘Wirtschaftswunder’ (economic miracle)—the TV set. She represented the very narrow and not less programmatic social environment of women, at the time, through the reality of new technologies, the electronic media.

A year before, in 1970, VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel published their legendary book ‘Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus und Film’ (Image Compendium of Viennese Actionism and Film) consisting of an anthology of images of works and films made by the Vienna Actionists, including the editors' work. For the first time the radical exploration of the body as a medium for an artwork—as it was undertaken by the Actionists—was introduced to a wider audience. By that time, EXPORT had already developed her ‘feminist actionism’ as a critique of the exploitation of the female body through the male Actionists' practices, EXPORT's critique referred in particular to works by Otto Mühl or Hermann Nitsch from that period. Since then, public authorities declared EXPORT's and Weibel's publication pornographic, and both editors were indicted and convicted for violating the youth protection act. In a second trial, VALIE EXPORT lost the legal custody of her daughter.

“If reality is a social construct and men are its engineers, we deal with a male reality,” writes EXPORT in her manifesto “Women's Art” in 1972, published in 1973. EXPORT's manifesto starts with a provocative statement:

“The position of art in the women's movement is the position of the woman in the art movement.”²

The artist reclaimed a space for women “so they can find themselves.” And, further on, she demanded that “we women must participate in the construction of reality through the media.”³

Indeed, EXPORT's manifesto triggered the first all-women's exhibition in Europe, which involved comprehensive research on the topic and featured the practices of women and women's groups that were dealing with the disadvantages encountered from being a woman in various areas and disciplines. It also involved persuasion in order to convince an art institution to host the project. In the end, the exhibition's scope was limited to Austrian artists, although

EXPORT had collected material from both Europe and the United States. Her letters to institutions in England, Germany, and the Netherlands offering to present the exhibition there as well were not crowned with success. Most of the institutions did not bother to respond.

Finally, in 1975, the exhibition 'Magna. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität' (Magna. Feminism: Art and Creativity) took place at the avant-garde gallery nächst St. Stephan in Vienna. On the the catalogue's cover, the exhibition was presented as:

"A survey on the female sensibility, imagination, projection and problematics, suggested through a tableaux of pictures, objects, photographs, lectures, discussions, readings, films and video screenings and actions."⁴

In her introduction to the catalogue of 'Magna', VALIE EXPORT writes about her intention—motivated by reports on the energy of the women's movement in the United States—to organize a European women's symposium on female creativity, including an exhibition, lectures, film screenings, actions, etcetera—all of which were "meant to make manifest the 'new' consciousness of the woman, strengthening it through its impact on the public."⁵

'Magna' introduced fine arts, videos, and it also included film screenings by female artists such as Friedl Bondy (later Friedl Kubelka and recently renamed to 'vom Gröller'), VALIE EXPORT, Rebecca Horn, Birgit Jürgensen, Maria Lassnig, Friederike Pezold, and Katharina Sieverding, among many others. Writings by Elfriede Gerstl, Elfriede Jelinek, Friederike Mayröcker, and others were presented in public readings. Music by Dorothy Jannone and Franca Sacchi was performed. A series of lectures by Peter Gorsen, Gisliind Nabakowski and others introduced art theory and history on the subject of the exhibition in the frame of the annual art talks hosted by the gallery. In her manifesto EXPORT concluded:

"Art can be a medium of our self-determination that brings new values for [the] art, that respective values that will change the reality through cultural sign processes, towards an adjustment of female needs. The future of [the] women will be the future of the history of [the] women."⁶

In her text "On the History of [the] Woman in Art History," included in the 'Magna' catalogue, EXPORT further elaborated on the topic of women as historic subjects:

"If [as has been maintained] the repression of women has been a historic necessity for the development of humankind, so is now, too, the liberation of women."⁷

⁴ VALIE EXPORT, ed.: *Magna. Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität. Ein Überblick über die weibliche Sensibilität, Imagination, Projektion und Problematik, suggeriert durch ein Tableau von Bildern, Objekten, Fotos, Vorträgen, Diskussionen, Lesungen, Filmen, Videobändern und Aktionen*, Vienna 1975.
⁵ *Ibid.*, p 1. Original quote: "[...] das 'neue' bewußtsein der frau manifestieren und, durch seine öffentliche wirkung, verstärken sollte."

⁶ VALIE EXPORT: *Women's Art* [see note 2], original quote: "die kunst kann ein medium unserer selbstbestimmung sein, und diese bringt der kunst neue werte, diese werte werden über den kulturellen zeichenprozess die wirklichkeit verändern, einer anpassung an die weiblichen bedürfnisse entgegen. Die zukunft der frau wird die geschichte der frau sein."

⁷ VALIE EXPORT: *Zur Geschichte der Frau in der Kunstgeschichte*, in: *Magna* [see note 4], p 11. Original quote: "Wenn [wie behauptet] die unterdrückung der frau für die entwicklung der menschheit geschichtlich notwendig war, so ist es nun die befreiung der frau ebenfalls."

⁸ The published German translation reads: 'Warum separierte Frauenkunst?.'

⁹ *Art and Artists*, 1973.

¹⁰ Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*.

¹¹ *Magna* [see note 4], p 3.

¹² Silvia Eiblmayer, VALIE EXPORT, Monika Prischl-Maier, eds.: *KUNST MIT EIGEN-SINN: Aktuelle Kunst von Frauen. Texte und Dokumentationen*, Vienna, Munich 1985.

The catalogue also includes an interview conducted by EXPORT with modernist artist Meret Oppenheim, and reprints a German translation of a seminal feminist text by Lucy Lippard, titled "Why a Separate Women's Art?,"⁸ first published in the catalogue 'Ten Artists' (New York, 1973) and in the magazine 'Art and Artists' (1973)⁹. Art critic Lippard—who in the same year published her volume on the "dematerialization of the art object" concludes its documentation of conceptual art practices in 1972¹⁰:

"Art critics still don't hesitate to use the word 'feminine' in a judgmental context, one that once caused women to avoid integrating gentle lines, sewn materials, household items, as well as pastel colors (especially pink!) into their works of art. Nowadays, women are certainly far from considering it to be a major compliment when being told they paint like men. Works by female artists that are shown in various exhibitions or similar collections originate from such a wide range of different art movements that it is nearly impossible to speak of a 'feminine' art per se. And yet there is no doubt that the female world of experience differs sociologically and biologically from that of the male. If art actually comes from inside—as it should—then it has to manifest in different ways."¹¹

II. Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn: Art with Self-Will

In 1985 VALIE EXPORT and Silvia Eiblmayer—in collaboration with Heidi Grundmann (video section) Cathrin Pichler (catalogue)—organized the "international exhibition of current art by women," as the subtitle of the exhibition 'KUNST MIT EIGEN-SINN'.¹² A large survey of art made by women presented at the former 'Museum des 20. Jahrhunderts' (Museum of the 20th Century) in Vienna also comprehended a program with performances, film and video screenings, and a three-day symposium on the topic of 'Female Aesthetics: Fiction, Idea or Realistic Project?'

This project represented what EXPORT more or less had already intended in the 1970s: it introduced about eighty female artists in the exhibition, from all over the world including Helena Almeida, Barbara Bloom, Sophie Calle, Helen Chadwick, Isa Genzken, Jenni Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Maria Lassnig, Lea Lublin, Cindy Sherman, Nancy Spero, and Adriana Simotova, just to name a few. In addition, it incorporated a public program with film and video screenings as well as an international symposium.

In the introduction, EXPORT quotes excerpts from her 1972 manifesto and re-elaborates her ideas in order to bring them into the context of an exhibition of this type in the 1980s:

“Present-day society is no longer one where women are isolated without rejoinder in the scope of discourse. The subversive strategies and provocations of the 1960s and 1970s have transformed the profile of this society, have made its face more humane. Through its fissures a new sense of meaning has risen to the surface like a periscope. ... The viewpoint according to which social unity is considered to be founded upon family sacrifice is losing its pathos. ... The home no longer remains the place of socialization, and parents no longer remain the facilitators of self-realization. ... The stratification of social processes as a cause of inequality cannot be quantitatively suspended, but must suspend itself. ... ‘Art with Self-Will’ represents such an implosion of the stratification, of contention with the other quality. ... Through historical exposure, the woman experiences history as skin, as a form of coalescence. In the perception of this disparity, she grapples from the future a new history, which will become a medium of her self-realization.”¹³

III. A Room of One's Own

How does the younger generation of female artists respond to the legacy of the earlier movement of feminism and its initiatives?

Nearly thirty years after ‘Magna’, in 2001, the female artist’s collective *a room of one's own* premiered at the Vienna Secession with an exhibition entitled ‘Experiment 2a’. Contrary to EXPORT’s self-initiative, this project arose from of an institutional opportunity. Artist Carola Dertnig was invited to participate in a show at the Vienna Secession within the framework of a project series called ‘Experiment’, initiated by artist and board member Dorit Margreiter, which at the time invited the participation of female curators exclusively.

“The motivation to initiate the forum was a result of the recognition that feminist practices have not yet reached the point that radical theories bring into focus. We are nowhere near being able to rest on the ‘warmed cushion’ that our mothers and grandmothers fought to give us.”¹⁴

With these words the collective initiative, which ceased its activities in the year 2005, introduced itself on its website. *a room of one's own* was not only explicitly referring to Virginia Woolf’s renowned essay from 1929¹⁵—already quoted by EXPORT in the ‘Magna’ catalogue—but also focused on the historical roots of the women’s movement. The group defined itself programmatically as a “forum of young women artists for discussing, investigating and expanding contemporary feminist discourses and practices.”¹⁶

“The contexts occupied through feminist struggles must be repeatedly redefined and worked over. For this reason, it is necessary to pick up at the point, where the generations before us stopped and to continue working with the feminist history that exists so far.

¹³ Ibid. p. 7. Original quote: “Die gegenwärtige Gesellschaft ist keine mehr, wo Frauen angesichts eines Diskurses ohne Antwort isoliert sind. Die subversiven Strategien und Provokationen der 60er und 70er Jahre haben das Profil dieser Gesellschaft transformiert, ihr Gesicht menschlicher gemacht. In den Brüchen ist ein neuer Sinn emporgestiegen wie ein Periskop. ... Die Ansicht, daß sich im familiären Opfer der soziale Zusammenhalt gründet, verliert ihr Pathos. ... Das Heim bleibt nicht mehr der Ort der Sozialisation, Eltern bleiben nicht mehr die Topik der Selbstrealisation. ... Die Stratifizierung der sozialen Prozesse als Ursache der Ungleichheit kann nicht quantitative aufgehoben werden, sondern muss sich selbst aufheben. ... Kunst mit Eigen-Sinn ist so eine Implosion der Stratifizierung, einer Auseinandersetzung mit der anderen Qualität. ... In der historischen Entblößung erfährt die Frau die Geschichte als Haut, als Form der Verwachsung. In der Empfindung dieser Unterschiedlichkeit holt sie sich aus der Zukunft eine neue Geschichte, die ein Medium ihrer Selbstrealisation sein wird.”
¹⁴ www.aroomofonesown.at [March 2011]
¹⁵ Virginia Woolf (1882–1941): *A Room of One's Own*; “A Woman Needs Money and A Room of Its Own to Write Fiction” is one of the most quoted text in the women’s movement.
¹⁶ www.aroomofonesown.at [March 2011]

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
¹⁹ Ibid.

[While] ... male colleagues, ... are thus almost automatically provided with the whole package, i.e. a professorship, a retrospective in the museum and a place in history, it is evident that young contemporary female artists usually persevere in subculture or emerge with a brief success, only to vanish again.

With the exception of the ONE woman per generation— this ONE woman then has the multi-disciplinary function of covering every section of art and representing a balanced relationship to the outside. The women artists of the same generation have already disappeared again and the next generation can barely remember their predecessors, let alone discover their traces in archives and libraries.

For this reason, this forum was initiated, in order to create an open field, in which a discourse can be established for actively processing feminist issues with processual strategies and thus positing new actions.”¹⁷

What were the new actions like?

In the exhibition ‘Experiment 2b’—following the first one at the Secession in 2002—the collective presented the results of current research through an audio installation that provided access to interview material. Skirts for sale were especially produced for the exhibition and printed with questions and statements taken from the group’s discussions. Thanks to their simple rectangular cut, the skirts could be easily transformed into banners with political messages. A demonstration video playfully explained the practice of wearing skirts and transforming them into banners.

“Over the course of its history, the skirt has been an article of clothing for both women and men. Accordingly, it is used in this exhibition as a metaphor for gender bending. Starting from an expanded concept of space, wearing skirts/carrying banners takes the statements and demands out of an art context into the surroundings of everyday life. Feminism is not a separate discourse, but has significance for the whole of society. ‘Feministische Forderungen sind tragbar!’ [Feminist demands are fitting!]”¹⁸

The most radical action was the donation of the early work of *a room of one's own* to ten of the most powerful and leading art museums, “chosen as examples for their contemporary exhibition and collection practices.”¹⁹ This intervention into the usually male-dominated collections in museums was part of the exhibition ‘Mothers of Invention—Where Is Performance Coming From’ which took place at the Factory of the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna in 2004. This large exhibition, organized by two artists from the group—Carola Dertnig and Stefanie Seibold—intended to demonstrate how performance is intertwined with political and social issues, thus contributing to a reassessment of historical and contemporary performance strategies, particularly by women.

Letters announcing the donation by *a room of one's own* were sent out to the directors of global museums such as The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna; Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, Paris; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Tate Modern, London; and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles. Object-like framed blowups of the letters were displayed in the exhibition.

By donating their early work, *a room of one's own's* goal was, according to the group, to:

"mirror the incompleteness of the patriarchal historiography of art, based on institutional representation and a traditional notion of the art object. This manifests in the obvious hesitancy of institutions to incorporate women into the art canon and in the low visibility of feminist art production. The donation therefore turns the game of the possession and transfer of concepts and products into a feminist strategy, whereby aspects of capitalism's logic are infiltrated and recharged with new meanings."²⁰

The motto 'GIFT TILL THEY SHIFT!' provides a closing statement for reflecting the group's contentious practice.

IV. Rewriting History

Carola Dertnig, in her work 'Lora Sana' (2005) researched the female participants in the original Actionist performances. A fictive character named Lora Sana (Actionist, age 62) made drawings over documentary images of legendary Actionist performances, thus 'rewriting' her own history—but also the history of gender roles and identities, memory and historiography. Some of the following excerpts from the wall text represent the voice of the fictive character Lora Sana, which were included in the installation by Carola Dertnig:

"I was there and I was not there. Maybe in the role of the model. When I look at myself in the photos today, this is what I think: naked, splattered with paint. Over, under or next to me there's a naked or dressed artist, who might be stuffing something into my mouth. It does not seem active. You're asking why I participated. I thought that the passive role as a victim that we had in society was the subject of our actions. I'm not so sure anymore. I can detect a certain instrumentalization of my body in the photos. That some of them were emphasized happened later on. I also did my own actions. Looking back, those who were not there are the ones who convey the legends. Excessively. I was too shy, in those surroundings, to dare or even consider an existence as an individual art producer. You always have to see things in relation to the time they happened, we never even thought of becoming famous. We were more aware of our

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Carola Dertnig, wall text of 'Lora Sana', exhibition *Carola Dertnig*, Andreas Huber gallery, Vienna, June 3rd–July 23rd 2005.

²² Anna Artaker, *Unbekannte Avantgarde*, (*Unknown Avant-garde*), Vienna 2008.

surroundings than others, that's true. We were young, we earned money so we covered the costs for the actions and basic needs, and the other part of our co-existence produced the art. It's true that those who are famous today are famous today. I was part of it and my name is on all the documents, but some of the ideas were mine. That's not written anywhere. The titles could be different. The original is called Leda and the Swan, but I'd prefer Lora Sana and Swan, a more elegant version, that's closer to the truth. But what's the truth? And who cares? I really had a hand in there, you can see it in the photos, you can find my name there, as collaborating artist. No, what are you thinking, do you have any idea how much money is involved? And how much one photo costs? It turned into an actionist machine, a factory, spewing capital."²¹

Anna Artaker, an Austrian artist working with the legacy of pioneering feminist artists bestows a last case-study that paves the way to wrap up the topic of women's initiatives and their positioning within the canon of art history after the 1970s. Artaker's series in progress 'Unknown Avant-garde' (2008) rewrites the history of important European avant-garde and neo-avant-garde groups and its female protagonists. The work comprised of ten historic photographs and their respective labels in which Artaker identified the specific group, the context of its artistic activity, photo credits, and sketched silhouettes of the people included on the portraits. Nonetheless, the names of the subjects of the portraits are all male and do not correspond to the list of names provided by Artaker (female). So far, Artaker identified and documented the following European avant-garde groups:

“мишень / Zielscheibe, Moscow, 1913 (The Target Group)
Groupe dada, Paris, 1922
Surréalistes, Paris, 1924
Bauhaus, Dessau, 1926
Experimentele Groep, Amsterdam, 1949
Cobra, Paris, 1949
Abstract Expressionists, New York, 1950
Situationist International, London, 1960
Gruppe Spur, Schwabing, 1961
Austria Filmmakers Cooperative, Vienna, 1968”

Artaker published a booklet that accompanied the 'Unknown Avant-Garde' series in which she elaborated an alternative history of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. The booklet includes a passage by Susan Sontag that offers a perfect ending to conclude this paper: "The photographer—and I would like to extend it to the artist in general—is not simply the person who records the past, but the one who invents it."²² ●