February 1 - March 24, 2013

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Boo Saville/ Caroline Achaintre/ Clem Crosby/ Dawn Mellor/ Elizabeth Eamer
Graham Dolphin/ Harry Burden/ James Unsworth/ Jonathan Baldock
Justin Mortimer/ Laura Oldfield Ford/ Tom Gidley
Curated by Derek Mainella & Elizabeth Eamer  Organized by the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art

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April 11 - 21, 2013

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Editorial

2 Issue 117: Translation
by Amish Morrell

Features

4 Le baiser de l’institution: Feminism After Elles
by Asia Wroblewski

16 Institutions by Artists: Resistance or Retreat?
by Diana Sherlock

22 Beyond Measure: Systems of Chance in the Art of Kristina Lahde
by Kristin Campbell

32 Dancing in the Face of Danger
Hito Steyerl in Conversation with Patricia Reed

36 Rehearsal for a Poem
Triziana La Melia in Conversation with Jacquelyn Ross

Exhibition Reviews

42 Staging Leigh Bowery
Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna
by Yuki Higashino

43 Roman Lilisca: Nu Balance
Rod Barton Gallery, London
by Dan Muir

44 Sean Alward: A Vertical City Goes Both Ways
Access Gallery, Vancouver
by Marina Rey

45 Kika Thorne: The Wildcraft Art Gallery of Windsor, Windsor
by Michael DiRisio

46 Archival Dialogues: Reading the Black Star Collection
Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto
by Heather White

47 Vanessa Maltese: Two-fold Tally,
Erin Stump Projets, Toronto
by Bill Clarke

Book Reviews

55 One for Me and One to Share: Artists’ Multiples and Editions
by David Dyment and Gregory Elgersma
review by David Senior

56 Open! Key Texts, 2004-2012:
Art, Culture and the Public Domain
by Jorinde Seidler and Liesbeth Melis
review by Petra Hawkes

56 Disturbances, by Critical Art Ensemble
review by Marc James Léger

57 Summer of Hate
by Chris Kraus
review by Lissa Edmondson

Noteworthy

58 Noteworthy
by Shannon Gardner-Smith

Artist Project

centrefold & tag: When Platitudes Become Form
by Christopher Kuzendran Thomas

pages 10-11: Facing It Forward
by The Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), Toronto

C School

C School online study guides for Institutions by Artists: Resistance or Retreat? by Diana Sherlock, and Dancing in the Face of Danger: Hito Steyerl in Conversation with Patricia Reed, plus additional readings and links. Available at www.cmagazine.com.

Translation

Nicolas Grenier: Proximities
Galerie Art Mûr, Montreal
by James D. Campbell

Michèle Provost: Rebranding Bytown
Bytown Museum, Ottawa
by Petra Hawkes

Rick Leong: The Sublimation of Self
Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax
by Jane Affleck

Hazel Meyer: Walls to the Ball
Eastern Edge, St. Johns
by Craig Francis Power

A New Novel by Bjarse Melgaard
Luxembourg & Dayan, New York
by Nicholas Calabrese

front cover
Kristina Lahde, Material System (white and blue), 2011, Altered measuring tapes, 44.5 x 58.5 cm
Image courtesy of the artist
It is a strange and exciting time for contemporary feminism. As Virginie Despentes, one of France’s so-called bad-girls, author and director of the controversial novel and film Baise-moi (problematically translated into English as Rape Me, perhaps by a Nirvana fan), points out, the stakes at the heart of this ongoing, never irrelevant movement extend beyond political and social concerns or sexual binaries. Feminism means exploding hierarchies rather than destabilizing or inverting them, radically altering the way people are taught, the way people perceive the world and one another, asserting attitudes of insubordination for the greater good based on personal convictions. “There is a kind of strength that is neither masculine nor feminine, a strength that impresses, terrifies, and reassures. The ability to say no... to not sidestep. I don’t care if the hero wears a skirt and has big tits or whether he sports a massive hard-on and smokes a cigar,” she adds.¹ Although Despentes’ at once unforgivingly nihilistic and touchingly utopian feminism has its limits and blind spots, it is useful in opening up space for full-out, violent, uncensored, not necessarily politically correct or thought-out feminist critique—critique authored by anyone who cares. Virginie Despentes’ radical model for a new feminism is one of many recent gestures towards a redefinition of the field that hinges not on feminism’s legacy but on its forward thrust. What strategies are being used today to shake things up in contemporary art?
FEMINISM’S SEMANTIC DANCE

If 2007 has been generally deemed “the year of feminism” by the American arts press, the discussions started by the numerous important feminist exhibitions and conferences of that busy calendar year are certainly still being held today. Arising from the scholarship surrounding exhibitions such as WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and events such as the “Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts” symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a debate about the contemporary use and value of the term “feminism.” Can the theories, concepts and political objectives of feminism be made relevant in today’s varied cultural landscape? Or, are we, as Cornelia Butler argues currently in a “postfeminist, post-identity politics moment?”1

BACK TO THE FUTURE, a quirky town-hall style language game organized by Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden in February 2009 at the Whitney Museum of American Art, constitutes one particularly noteworthy reaction to the problems raised. Participants in Kennedy and Linden’s experiment were asked to speak about their own personal feminisms without using the words most often associated with the field. For example, in the Dictionary of Temporary Approximations, elaborated by the creative duo “misogyny” was replaced by the placeholder “prejudice,” “subordination” stood in for “patriarchy,” “pleasure” supplanted the loaded term “sexual liberation,” and most significantly, “lived practice” was swapped for “feminism.” The goal of this exercise in limiting discourse was to highlight the immediacy of feminist concerns and, only for the course of one evening, to shake feminism free of its militant past. In “Making Ourselves Visible,” Kennedy and Linden state their motivations for what risks being seen as an irreverent or even a disrespectful experiment:

Recently, we have been told by a number of prominent feminists from various generations that feminism is dead. We are troubled that this is their perception when we see so much life in it still... The tendency to treat [the 1960s and 70s] as a feminism gone zero centralizes the discourse and limits its meaningful articulation to a handful of strategies and practices... This produces a hierarchy within feminism that fails to consider its multifaceted relationship to the ground on which it is enacted.2

For Kennedy and Linden, the possibilities afforded by exploring feminism outside of its history outweighed the risks of challenging the claims made during 2007’s historicization of the movement. Since their experiment at the Whitney Museum, Kennedy and Linden have cleverly secured the domain name www.contemporaryfeminism.com, where they document the different iterations of their ongoing project, which is to publicly explore the question: what does “feminism” mean today?

AVOIDING “FEMINISM”

What about those who choose not to take up the feminist discussion directly? Such is the situation in France, where feminism or at least the word “feminism” is still being avoided today—not only by public figures such as former First Lady Carla Bruni who have publicly declared it as passé but also, surprisingly, by many cultural producers who can be said to be doing feminist work. To use the word “avoiding” in relation to feminism may seem to suggest that feminism is something that can be kept away or refrained from, that it is a kind of a contract one could potentially quash, nullify, evade. Accusing someone of avoiding feminism can be as serious as contending that this person has overlooked or endeavoured to refute women’s rights. One can only hope this is not often the case. Pointing out that feminism has been “avoided” can also simply mean—and such is this article’s intent—that under certain circumstances, artists, writers, curators and critics have specifically chosen not to align themselves or their creative practices with the rich social, political and creative imperatives of feminism even though their works deal with feminist issues head-on. Elles@centrepompidou, the very popular and unprecedented permanent collection exhibition of works by women artists held at Paris’ Musée national d’art moderne (Mnam) from May 2009 to February 2011, is perhaps the most telling recent example of an institutional maneuvering around the movement and the term.

Over the course of almost two years, 2.5 million visitors discovered close to one thousand works by more than three hundred women artists from the Pompidou’s collection, representing what Camille Morinou, the exhibition’s primary curator, and Alfreda Paqueument, the museum’s director, hoped to be a rich and varied history of women’s art. Elles was generally well received, but the show’s detractors immediately and unfairly called out the organizers for ghettoizing women artists. Quite obviously, elles@centrepmipidou was based on exclusion—that of women by men—but unlike the Pompidou’s 1995 show Feminin-Masculin, Le sexe de l’art, its goal was never specifically to deal with issues of gender relations in art. Elles was actually as much an interrogation of the politics of collecting art and the way women artists are represented in institutions as an exhibition with women artists. By focusing particularly on the museum’s role in writing art history and by proposing that women’s artworks are as representative of the “established” narrative as arc works by men, Morineau and Paqueument hoped to dispel gender determinism in the arts. They did this, commendably, at the risk of exposing gaps and lacks in the Pompidou’s collection.

In the preface and introductory essays to the exhibition catalogue, Morineau and Paqueument go to great lengths to frame and put into context what they both describe as a manifesto. Significantly, both organizers work to distance their project from feminist concerns. Situating Elles in relation to the various feminist exhibitions of 2007, Paqueument notes, “It seemed to us that reducing recent or less recent artistic creation to...militant attitudes only partially accounted for the growing presence and impact of women artists in contemporary art.”3 Morineau is more forward as she tries to nuance the exhibition’s raison d’être: “The Mnam is exhibiting only women, and yet the goal is neither to show that female art exists nor to produce a feminist event, but to present the public with a hanging that appears to offer a good history of twentieth-century art.”4 In addition to this, a very tangible reticence towards the word “feminism” seemed to traverse the entire exhibition. For example, the two sections dedicated most explicitly to feminist histories, sections which grouped together the works of Value Export, Orlan, Hannah Wilke, Sigalit Landau and Andrea Fraser, among others, did not point to feminism content directly but instead were titled more poetically, “Fire At Will” and “The Body Slogan.” The back cover of the Elles catalogue explicitly states what Kennedy and Linden would call the semantic problem at hand: “Neither the viewpoint adopted nor the resulting works can be limited by simplistic labels such as ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’.”

In light of this kind of framing away from feminism while taking on feminist works and concerns, the object of the organizers’ so-called manifesto becomes unclear. If it is not a feminist action to mount an all-women permanent collection exhibition at a national art centre in a country where, as Morineau herself points out, “male-female equality is proclaimed as a necessity yet is so far from being achieved,” what exactly is it, then?

BLUEPRINTS

When faced with Morineau’s initial plans for an exhibition including permanent collection and borrowed works that would directly tackle the lack of discourse around feminism in France, the previous question becomes even more pressing. As she writes in the first draft of her exhibition proposal, titled Femmes, féminités, féminismes, “while feminist ideas are largely explored in the American art scene, in Europe and notably in France, they are given unsatisfactory attention.”5 The exhibition, as she proposed it, was to explore multiple versions of feminism chronologically, in three distinct parts: an introduction to modern and avant-garde movements from 1910 to 1960 that criticized the clichéd image of the woman; a comprehensive section about 60s and 70s militant feminist art practices organized thematically according to headings such as “Against Patriarchal Domination” and “Against the Woman Object”; and finally, a critical look at feminism since the 80s that zeroed in on globalization, politics and the idea of the body reimagined in light of queer theory and AIDS.6 Judy Chicago’s The Dinner Party (1974–79) was to open the exhibition in the museum’s main forum. Morineau also planned to include works by Rose Sélavy (Marcel DuChamp’s alter ego), Victor Burgin, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and other male artists in order to paint a complex, forward-thinking and inclusive portrait of feminism’s history.

Morineau’s next draft—this time called Plurielles—is a vague blueprint of what would eventually become elles@centrepompidou. No longer centered on feminism, the proposed exhibition’s driving force was its place in history as the first-ever long-running permanent collection show of art by women. Not surprisingly, the key difference between the second plan and the final product is related to feminist content. Morineau was intent on dedicating part of Plurielles to feminist history, featuring a dynamic series of rooms titled “Feminists or Rebels? At the Heart of a Political Revolution.”7 Since no such open discussion about feminism took place within the elles@centrepompidou exhibition space, these early documents are
above & pg. 8

Jon Kennedy and Liz Linden, Documentation from Back to the Future...an experimental discussion on contemporary feminist practice..., February 23, 2009, Whitney Museum of Art, New York

PHOTO: LIZ LASTER
telling of the negotiations that must have happened behind closed doors to essentially remove the word “feminism” from the show. The deliberate choice to step away from a feminist vocabulary in order to avoid producing an event that could potentially be ‘reduced’ to its feminist content reveals much about institutional fears and lingering social stigmas.

In the 
{\textit{Elles}} catalogue, Morineau reminds us that “displaying the collections is not the same as mounting an exhibition: the work is already here, the choices have already been made.” 11 Aruna D’Souza echoes this sentiment in her 2010 essay “Float the Boat!: Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum,” published in Modern Women, a massive volume crowning MoMA’s five-year research initiative into its holdings of art by women. 12 As the Pompidou exhibition made plain, … revisionist projects are beholden to the collections that curators have at their disposal. 13 Be this as it may, much has been said about the energetic efforts made to renew the Pompidou’s acquisitions mandate. In the five years leading up to 
{\textit{Elles}}, the museum purchased 40 percent of the works by women artists presented. This constitutes an exceptional feat for an institution with, according to art journalist Emmanuelle Lequeux, a decidedly chauvinist reputation. 14 Morineau is quoted in the L\textit{A Times}, hinting at some of the challenges she faced in the planning stages of the show: “Some of my colleagues strongly resisted it, saying, ‘Camille, not only are you showing only women, but you want to buy only women. It’s too much.’” 15 The supposed holes in the Pompidou’s impressive collection are not necessarily evident for the exhibition’s am-biguous, if not distant, attitude towards the word “feminism.” Sometimes it truly is all a matter of framing, or, better yet, compromise on Morineau’s behalf.

{\textbf{STRATEGIES FOR THE FEMINIST FUTURE}}

The Pompidou’s call for institutional self-reflexivity did not go unheard by other art centres. One year after the 
{\textit{Elles}} opening, MoMA presented Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography, an exhibition of over 200 photographs by women from the museum’s permanent collection, and hosted the Art Institutions and Feminist Politics Now Symposium at which Camille Morineau spoke. Equally interesting to note is the all-women permanent collection exhibition Esther Tripanier organized to mark her beginning as director of the Musée des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ) in 2008, titled Femmes artistes: La conquête d’un espace 1900-1985. 16 In 2010, Pierre Landry continued Tripanier’s project with a show focused on the MNBAQ’s contemporary collections. Although neither of the 
{\textit{Elles}} catalogue showed took on a specifically feminist position, both endeavoured to present a more nuanced narrative of Quebec art history while exploring women artists’ fraught journey to achieve professional recognition.

The 
{\textit{Elles}}/centre Pompidou “challenge” was most recently taken up by the Seattle Art Museum. From October 11, 2011 to January 11, 2012, two exhibitions of art by women were featured at the SAM: Elles: Women Artists from the Centre Pompidou, a condensed and re-vamped version of the Paris show, and Elles: SAM—Singular Works by Seminal Women Artists, a permanent collection exhibition (albeit fleshed out with works borrowed locally). City-wide partnerships with smaller galleries, theatre and performing arts venues, libraries and the University of Washington’s Women’s Center expanded the effec-tive 
{\textit{Elles}} spirit outside of the museum’s walls. However, given the show’s brevity and uncri-tically affirmative marketing (for instance, viewers were encouraged to donate at least $50 in order to add a name to the museum’s Wall of Women), the SAM’s girl-power-friendly slogan “Women Take Over” felt temporary and left the unfortunate impression that rescuing women’s works from the vaults, even as a way to defy institutional structures, could be a means to an end, a way of marketing the image, not the reality, of women’s artistic empowerment.

Nevertheless, the subtle text Camille Morineau posed to the very institution that employs her is proof that feminism can be practised today, if not by discussing it openly, then by setting an example and developing strategies that pave the way for institutional change. Change, though, cannot only be conceived as adding works signed by women to a collection, publishing monographs about women artists or striving for gender equity in exhibition opportunities. Aruna D’Souza rightly points out that the museum must “reimagine itself… according to the political imperatives of feminist art itself,” or, one could add, according to the call of difference. Change, thus, is not simply a matter of numbers or space; it is, as Virginie Despentes so colourfully reminds us, a question of attitudes, work and will.

This sentiment has never been as apparent as in Canada, where very recently, Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, co-founders of the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto, as well as Louise Déry, director of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) gallery and jury member for the 2011 Sobey Art Award, manipulated the system, so to speak, through powerful back-door feminist gestures. In May 2012, Mitchell and Logue were invited to speak at the Tate Modern. Instead of taking advantage of this opportunity to describe their own creative projects, Mitchell and Logue brought along eight artists to share the spotlight and participate in a queer show-and-tell titled the “Axe Grinding Workshop.” This is just one example of their inclusive motto to always “FAG it forward” by pooling resources, breaking down hierarchies and gender boundaries, and creating opportunities while promoting creativity. As for Louise Déry, she is the motivating force behind Quebec’s unprecedented move to put forward exclusively women artists—Olivia Boudreau, Raphaëlle de Groot, Julie Favreau, Nadia Myre, and Ève K. Tremblay—for the 2011 Sobey Art Award Long List. When asked in an email exchange whether this was a strategic plan or a pragmatic reflection of the region’s top artists—who also happened to be women, Déry confirmed the politics of her bold move: “My colleagues knew right away what I was getting at. In brief, I nominated five women, among many artists whose work I admire, to assure that at least one would be a finalist.” Surely in part due to Déry’s passionate initiative, Quebec’s Raphaëlle de Groot was finally awarded the grand prize, after being nominated five times.

“\textit{Le baiser de l’institution}…”

Translation
In another openly and provocatively feminist gesture, Marie-Ève Charbonneau, art critic for Le Devoir, Thérèse St-Gelais, art history professor at UQAM and Marie-Josée Lafontaine, OPTICA director, put on a two-part exhibition playfully titled “Archifeminists!” to mark OPTICA's 40th anniversary last year (the prefix archi simultaneously recalls the archive and puts an extreme emphasis on the word it qualifies. For example, “C’est archifaux!” means “That’s totally false!”). The curators looked through the centre's archive and exhibition history from a specifically feminist perspective for the very first time, assembling works by women who had previously participated in shows organized by OPTICA such as Suzy Lake, Jana Sterbak, Sophie Béfail Clément and Emmanuella Léonard. This inventive exhibition pointed to the fact that feminism has always been part of the centre's fabric, a centre which was initially devoted to photography and is now focused on emerging practices, including multimedia. By highlighting the grain of feminist critique or trace of feminist spirit that lies in art works not necessarily declared as such in the first instance, the organizers revealed feminism's wide reach and sometimes even quiet strength.

Whatever their personal agendas or understandings of feminism may be, Mitchell and Logue, Déry, Charbonneau, St-Gelais and Lafontaine as well as Kennedy and Linden, Morinaud and others, strive to make institutions more flexible through their contemporary artistic, curatorial, academic and creative practices. They harness the institutional or anti-institutional powers they possess in order to voice their concerns and force discussions—even among those who would rather not listen or participate—both between and outside of feminist circles. As the term “feminism” expands, contracts and proliferates—from La Centrale’s Féministes Électriques to Amelia Jones’ notion of parafeminism to the newly developing field of queer feminism— one thing is for certain: contemporary feminism is anything and everything but “post.”

I would like to thank Louise Déry, Amelia Jones, Jen Kennedy, Maria Larouche, Steve Lynn, Tessa Mällary, Catherine Mayrhenke, Kevin Rodgers and Robin Simpson, for our fruitful conversations and exchanges, and in particular, Camille Morinaud, for very graciously giving me access to the elles@centreponpidoule archive.

BIO
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ENDNOTES
4 Alfred Pacquement, “Preface,” in elles@centreponpidoule: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 1. In a postscript to her previously mentioned chapter, Amelia Jones, who spoke to Camille Morinaud about the challenges of putting together Élles en octobre 2009, points out Pacquement’s erratic and contradictory framing of the exhibition.
5 Camille Morinaud, “elles@centreponpidoule: Addressing Difference,” in elles@centreponpidoule: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 16.
6 Ibid.
7 Camille Morinaud, Femmes, féministes, féministes, Document in elles@centreponpidoule archive, consulted on July 20, 2012 at the office of C. Morinaud (Maeam/GGI Centre Pompidou, Paris, France), 1. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French are by the author.)
8 Ibid., 2.
9 Camille Morinaud, Pinettes, Document in elles@centreponpidoule archive (Maeam/GGI Centre Pompidou, Paris, France), 2.
10 Ibid., 2.
11 Camille Morinaud, “elles@centreponpidoule: Addressing Difference,” 15.
15 In an email to the author on December 11, 2012, Esther Trepyenier explained that she began planning this exhibition in September 2008, before she had heard about the Pompidou’s show. In fact, Femmes artistes, La conquête d’un espace, 1900-1945, on view from May 7, 2009 to August 6, 2009, opened a few short weeks before elles@centreponpidoule.
18 Louise Déry, e-mail message to the author, December 10, 2012.
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