



INSIDE THE VISIBLE

an elliptical traverse of
20th century art

in, of, and from the feminine

edited by M. CATHERINE DE ZEGHER

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women's
work
is never
done

Curated by
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14 November 2023 - 27 January 2024

IN THE RELATION

Erin Manning

It is 2011. The table is covered by a blueprint of the various venues for the 18th Sydney Biennale, *all our relations*, which Catherine de Zegher and Gerald McMaster are curating. I stand over the drawings, trying to parse the logic that connects one artist, one artwork to another. There are 2 major exhibition venues in the city and one a ferry trip away. My work, *Stitching Time*, will be housed there, on Cockatoo Island.

Catherine and I are meeting for the second time. She is in Montreal to sit with the artists she has selected. This is what first stands out to me: that Catherine does not connect to the “idea” of art, to what is considered of value in a prestige market that has a tendency to recognize what already has recognition. Catherine is not interested in being directed by what is fashionable. Relation drives her: she is interested in webs, in overlap, in the interstitial and the not-yet valued. Certainly, Catherine is also a visionary whose tender engagement with what stands apart has foregrounded artists now very much of the mainstream: Martha Rosler, Cecilia Vicuña, Mona Hatoum. But she never chose them because of their recognizability. She chose them for what they bring to the very question of what else art can do.

Catherine has always worked this way. In the October Book *Women Artists at the Millennium* (MIT 2006), her text on the relational opens on a 1981 work by Cecilia Vicuña. This work, *Parti si passion*, is as ephemeral as it is prescient. What is it to participate, passionately, through words printed on the street, words that will quickly turn to dust? This unintelligible gesture, unintelligible in the sense that it refuses the legibility of institutional longevity, pushing the limits of a market that responds best to that which persists, at least in hype, refuses the grand gesture. Instead, it asks what else moves us into the conviviality of a more-than human collectivity, a participation in the passion of the ineffable.

Vicuña’s work is amplificatory. Its mode is always minor, working in the interstices of experience as yet unmarked by the legibility of any archive. And at the same time, it refuses to quantify this minor gesture, to make it stand out within the modalities of recognition that would want to capture. Catherine begins here in her 2001 conference text, but also in her curatorial practice: she leans into what does not yet register in the dominant modality of recognizability.

The blueprints are confusing. I stand over them to make sense of how decisions are made. Why this artist here? Why choose the island for this one? But as I listen to Catherine, I begin to understand. There is no legend here that could be hardened into a method. What Catherine is doing with the blueprints is feeling-into proximities and distances, seeing how different works expose openings for each other, and creating conditions for those potential encounters. Because a relational approach can never only be about artworks occupying space. It has to be about what the works do in the field they co-compose.

Categories are not useful to such an approach. Artists can’t be paired simply based on an aesthetic lineage, or a cultural one. A quality of fabulation has to take hold that is capable of being sensitive to what might happen in the betweenings of work. But not only that. There is also the movement itself. How does a visitor actively encounter the work? Do we give them the work at a predictable distance, keeping the body in a choreography of apartness? Or is there a way they might be lured into the relation? What kind of movement potential can be seeded? Might habitual choreographies be shifted? And if so, what works brought into relation might best generate the kind of attunement that moves a body into another angle of engagement? The blueprint is the first step toward this question.

Over time, many techniques emerge, some directly related to the geography of Sydney, and others curated into the exhibition. For instance, the ferry plays a large role in how the works on Cockatoo Island are experienced. There is a different feel on the island. People come with a bit more time, and with the kind of curiosity that comes with an adventure. They do more than see the works—they hang out a bit, have a coffee, sit by the water.

Sitting in our kitchen, Catherine and I talk about these kinds of movements. Will people walk through the botanical gardens to get the ferry? Which artist will they have encountered just before their walk? How will that artist accompany them on their journey? There are also some artists on the boat. Is it possible to give the feel of an exhibition that isn’t constrained by the venue?

And then there are the curated gestures. Tiny works are often placed beside large ones, and when the time comes and I sit in the museum in Sydney, I see how this generates a more complex movement in the gallery. Of course, a germ of this is always at work in a gallery: the spectator will intuitively approach a work to see its detail, or to read the wall text. But the quality of movement activated by Catherine’s curation feels different. It feels more crafted. And more committed to all that grows between the works, including the perceptual field they elicit.

If this is movement-with, there is also the question of movement-across. What kinds of vectors can the choreography activate? Can these pull a visitor into different durations?

It is difficult to gauge how a visitor to an exhibition feels the movement of the whole. But this is what I retain from that particular exhibition, and what I most cherish in Catherine’s work: the care for all that is activated in the interstices. Because the artfulness is never fully held by an object. An object is a mode, an inflection. It catches the formative tendencies of a process and gives it a certain shape. This shape carries it forth, but if the work is doing the work, it doesn’t hold it to itself. The work always escapes its frame.

The more-than the work carries is its movement-potential. Not only how it moves us, but also how it moves thought. A movement of thought is only proto-linguistic. It need not find its way in words. A movement of thought is not the phrase Vicuña draws on the pavement. It is the gesture the word leaves behind.

Another account of Catherine de Zegher might focus on which artists—chiefly women—she has worked with over decades of curation, and how this careful attention to work that opens up the artful has shifted the artistic landscape. This is no doubt an extraordinary contribution. But a focus on individual artists might miss this quality of what she calls “the relational as the (feminine) space of the radical.”

The relational is radical every time an effort is made to counter the self-entrepreneurial tendencies that attempt to market the artful. Artfulness—the aesthetic yield of a process that reveals its more-than—is not reducible to an object. It cannot quite be choreographed, but conditions can be set in place for it. The blueprints could only be approximations of what would be seeded in the act of artistic processes coming into relation. There is always a risk that nothing much will emerge, or that movement’s existing tendencies will be too ingrained to generate the kind of sideways potential such a choreographic engagement with curation would hope to be able to achieve.

Rare is the curator who will take this risk. And this is the important legacy of Catherine’s curatorial practice. That she asks, in every case, where the artful most does its work. And how this quality of excess generates new ways of moving, and of being moved.

This is political work, in the minor key. It is work that understands the danger of reducing art to its grand gestures, its approach astute to capital’s capture of any and all excess. Catherine de Zegher is modest in her ways. She speaks little of her own process, having spent a lifetime foregrounding that of others. But in so doing, she has given artists a relational field in which to experiment. And these experiments will live on thanks to the worlds she has propelled into act through her careful blueprints, and her generous refusal to stick to them.

WOMEN’S WORK IS NEVER DONE

Catherine de Zegher

As a museum director and curator, I have been fortunate to collaborate with wonderfully talented, actually brilliant women artists, who made beautiful work that carried profound meaning but that often nevertheless remained at length almost invisible and unacknowledged. I have always felt a deep connection with these artists as protagonists, women from many different parts of the world, and felt astonished by the generosity of their oeuvre that was sometimes created in the confines of social indifference. In our shared attention to the world of life, we came to initiate small steps towards a more inclusive and, over time, a greener society. It can be summarized in the promoting of the feminine principle—a principle of empathy, compassion, and relation. Although I sense a generational bond in time and a connection across borders, what I cherish most in the relation curator and artist is a long-lasting conversation and steady loyalty over many years, a following of each other’s work, though projects can tear us apart for long periods of time. But the shared ideals keep us together, against a world driven by manic production and consumption to the exclusion of all else, lost energy flow, pointless waste and greed.

This conversation has a resonance in the making of an exhibition or a book, as they are composed through the notion of the works being in conversation with each other, or more to the point, through art’s working understood in itself as being a form of conversation, its “action” in the world is in the interrelationships it traces and provokes. One work alongside another may open to a tension or a resolution, act as a punctuation or may be the opening of meanings that have consequences far beyond the book or the gallery. The agent of this transformative becoming is the viewer or the reader, in their attention and in what they bring to their seeing and to the telling of which they are a part. It is why I see this conversation of art and interrelation as the matter, fleeting and transient as it maybe, of the feminist principle, at once fragile and tenacious in its holding to a compassionate recognition which may open whole worlds between us, worlds in which those consigned to the margins may now be agents of their own lives. A meaning that transcends gender and identity in our recognition of each other and of the animate and inanimate world we inhabit. These are not abstract reflections, they are evident, if we are open to it, in the works that are shown here.

The exhibition *Women’s work is never done* evolves with a simple logic, 3 decades are divided over the 3 galleries, starting in the early 1990s with the exhibition that has become a reference for many: *Inside the Visible. An Elliptical Traverse of 20th-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (1995-1997) in the first gallery; the second gallery is devoted to the first decade of the new millennium with my work related to ‘*drawing as relation*’ at The Drawing Center (1999-2006) and ‘*On Line: Drawing through the 20th Century*’ at MoMA in New York (2010); and the exhibition ends in the third gallery with the next decade involving the 18th Sydney Biennale (*all our relations*, 2012), the 55th Venice Biennale (*Simryn Gill: Here art grows in trees*, 2013), and the 5th Moscow Biennale (*Bolshe Sveta / More Light*, 2013) to be rounded off with the latest project at *Embrace Space* in Scotland (2023) that addresses art and nature, particularly related to ecology and rewilding.

During my early research into the art of women in the 1990s, I had come to understand that many were trying to develop a different model of coexistence—a model not based on alienation, confrontation, and exclusion, but on reciprocity, conversation, and participation.

At the time Bracha Ettinger defined it as the matrixial model that was advanced along the phallic model. Some women artists have tried to formulate a new textual and visual language to convey this moving and compassionate model in which we come into being in togetherness, much as we may conceive the relation of a mother with child, in the womb or matrix. These women point to the emerging subjectivity-as-encounter, not first focusing on individualism but on relation itself as fundamental and meaningful for our becoming. This is also in step with profound, even existential, implications for society as something we actively effect and the fullness of our individuality. In the belief that otherwise we remain unrealised. Evelyn Nicodemus speaks of a noncoercive intersubjectivity of mutual understanding and reciprocal recognition.

During my tenure at The Drawing Center and my curatorial work at MoMA, I noticed that the visual language in which this matrixial model comes most to the fore is drawing, because, since childhood, drawing is in essence a medium of relation. A primal mode of image production, mark-making stages not only a separating but also a binding in the discovery of the trace. According to this view, the graphic activity of the hand plays a role in attempting to reconstruct symbolically the lost dual identity. With her or his every gesture, the child secures the absent mother’s echoing answer and trusts the page with the internalized mother. In this transaction, the structural relationship and the inscriptive game organized around separation and attachment are more important than any of their representations. Love, they say, is the inventor of drawing. Informed both by rupture and reciprocity, drawing constitutes a haptic space of transition and, because to gesture outwards is not only about the “I exist” but the “I exist in relation to someone else,” drawing is a form of intimacy as much as of conversation. Most notably is that, over time, as the exhibition *On Line* suggests, the solitary line of modernist thought develops into the minimalist grid and then, mostly through the relational work of women artists, like Gego, Cecilia Vicuña, and Eva Hesse, into the connective web.

More recently, this conversation has come to permeate the world of life as a necessary countering of the existential distress caused by climate change and sensed by many among us. This seems indeed to be indirectly and inevitably a part of art as its working is to induce the ability to respond—in fact, the responsibility to the material world and to alterity, to the other. There is a relation between the way one handles materials, with respect and interaction, and the way we connect with people in society. In this sense, the material becomes the social as much as the social can be captured in matter—the integrative role of art is reframed in the web of relations with a focus on community and environment. Non-dominance of people and nature has its correspondence in a desire for non-mastery in the arts, a refusal that is tuned to the cyclic daily with tender attention as in the work of Simryn Gill and Ria Verhaeghe. Eco-feminism pointed out the materialization in art of the immersive and responsive connection women have to the earth and her reproductive cycles. In the artist’s mind-set, like of Edith Dekyndt, one is no longer at the centre of dominance over the universe, but simply a partaker of the Earth and her gifts within the conviviality of the human and the non-human. In the light of the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene, it is time to finally overcome the anthropocentrism responsible for justifying a human subject over and against a world of things. The understanding of the proximity and agency of the non-human presence marks the passage from ignorance to knowledge to awareness, which can be experienced in the third gallery—all our relations.

