REBUS

GENDER, SOCIETY, AND ART.

Index

Editorial

Editor: Solange Gulizzi

This issue explores intersections between gender, society, and art in modern and contemporary art and visual culture. It also reflects the University of Essex's international spirit, with contributions that consider work from South American and Asian artists, as well as from the British, Berlin-based artist Lucy Beech.

At the core of this issue is COCO, the Uruguayan collective or female artists doing pioneering work in their country by turning the Uruguayan world of art and art history upside-down. Their mission: to review and re-signify Uruguayan art from a feminist perspective. COCO takes up Linda Nochlin's question, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and gives it a regional twist by focusing on the heteropatriarchal structures that have historically dominated the art scene in Uruguay.

We had the pleasure to talk with members of COCO and publish an interview here in which they shed light on the beginnings of the collective. This issue also shares a chapter of their latest book, *RIP*, a collection of articles by various artists and thinkers who explore the female dimension of the Uruguayan art field. The question that sparked their quest towards a feminist understanding of art in Uruguay is ultimately a global question that transcends local barriers. Indeed, the female members of COCO did not feel represented by the big (male!) names in art history, which left these artists not only unrepresented but also wondering how to move forward in a world with relatively few examples of how female artists operate.

Moving on to Europe, Elisabetta Garletti explores Lucy Beech's moving image practice in the article "'More Women's Work': Feminised Labour and the Corporatisation of Feminist Discourse in Lucy Beech's Moving-Image Practice." The article considers the ambivalent position of self-declared neoliberal feminist women in a context that increasingly aligns emancipation with capitalistic and neoliberal values, asking whether it is possible to maintain a level of resistance while acting within such an oppressive structure.

This issue concludes with an exploration of Asian art by Chenxiao Jin, who examines Japonisme's historiography in the article "Reflecting on Japonisme: Art, Gender and Race." The paper focuses on defying patriarchal stereotypes by completing the existing male-oriented historiography with female artists. As part of this

historiographical corrective, Jin also calls for a shift of focus from a Eurocentric and patriarchal understanding towards one that includes gender and race.

Happy reading!

RIP. A decolonial feminist critique of art in Uruguay

Authors: COCO Collective. Catalina Bunge, Natalia de León, María Mascaró.

Abstract

From a decolonial feminist perspective, the COCO collective analyzes the field of art in Uruguay, concluding that it has historically been patriarchal and deeply buried in colonialism. Based on a feminist, queer and decolonial approach, COCO exposes and interrogates the systemic mechanisms that have built this violent and oppressive field towards all art that is not produced by white, cis and heterosexual males. With optimism, it exposes proposals towards an inclusive and plural art and reflects on some of the region's current trends, which have become a source of proposals and strategies for global crises.

Where are women artists in our art history? Why is it only male artists who represent our cultural imaginary? These were some of the questions that brought us together in 2016, as women working in an art field in which we did not feel entirely comfortable. The lives of Joaquín Torres García, Juan Manuel Blanes, Rafael Barradas or Pedro Figari did not represent us, let alone come close to our projections as artists. It was impossible to see ourselves as artists who would have a street, a school, or a museum named after them. It was even utopian to think that one of our pieces would be hanging on the wall of the permanent exhibition at the National Museum of Visual Arts (MNAV, for its Spanish Acronym). This strangeness had its reason; there are no examples. There are no women in our artistic pantheon, and the entry requirements were clear: to be male, white, heterosexual, cis, Montevidean, upper middle class.

The model in which art was born and developed in Uruguay was sustained by structures in which we did not fit. Besides demanding us to be something we are not, the national artistic narrative perpetuated the hegemonic artistic canon; great themes, classic formats, its own exhibition spaces, and its mercantilist logic Museum and galleries, exorbitant prices for the works, minimal support from the state, curators and critics arbitrarily validating people and pieces, and the conception of art as a short-range product only accessible to an exclusive elite. Who designed this logic? Who did they serve and for what reason? We shared our discomfort with so many other people

who had been for years putting up resistance and expressing criticism from their collective, activist, and reflective practices, pushing for action in all artistic, curatorial, critical, management and research practices. Powered by this impulse for change, we created COCO, a feminist collective with ambitious goals: to make gender dissident individuals, to democratize access to exhibition spaces, to reconfigure art as an agent of change—and not just a bargaining chip—and to propose a kind of art that represents and includes us all.

Aligned with this new wave of feminism that kept growing, striving for equality in all areas of society, COCO examines the field of art in Uruguay as a dying body. What had happened to it? That body needed to update its habits to adapt to a changing habitat that was making it sick. The world has changed. Today, the impunity with which certain prevailing logic discriminates is in full sight and undergoing an eradication process. Power relations have mutated, and control is now disputed by new agents, there are new ways of relating, producing, thinking and living together. That body that we aimed to examine imploded, as a consequence of the effects produced by a habitat in which it no longer fitted. We then carried out a meticulous analysis on the organs that made up that body we called art in Uruguay, an investigation which aimed to go through its history, to analyse its production, validation and circulation logics. To interrogate the modes, to follow the paths, to unravel the threads with which the artistic narrative was built in Uruguay.

We reviewed and analysed different collections in museums, archives, cultural centres, awards and distinctions, publications, number and types of individual exhibitions, artists' workshops, representations in biennials, national and international events, press releases, blog entries and digital platforms; we interviewed cultural agents and approached collectives, artists and researchers who were already resisting through their practices. Like a scalpel that carefully opens the tissues, we broke through layers, exposing the communicating vessels that had spread the disease. The investigation yielded a diagnosis that did not surprise us: our art field suffered from the colonialist patriarchy of the great capitals of Western art. Entering the 21st century, that model was clearly in decline. That feeling of modernity that prevailed during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when art had emerged and flourished in Uruguay, was now considered to be responsible for inequality in all areas of society. Heteronormativity as a rule, white supremacy, the male conceived as a superior subject against other gender identities, the great narratives, the traditions,

the classic formats and themes in art, etc. That stale air felt toxic when facing new forms of feminism; the *queer* theory and decolonial thought, which allowed the denaturalization of what was—and unfortunately still is--happening and proposed new nomenclatures for the established dynamics: misogyny, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, classism, colonialism, etc. Inherited mechanisms that projected distrust towards everything that was foreign to those who had controlled the production and consumption of art and who constituted the very valuation scale up to that moment.

Feminist criticism in visual arts

Through the feminist critique of the second half of the 20th century, we get to identify and point out those mechanisms that, based on the discourses that make up our historical cultural production, have led to the creation of a female subject as a symbolic identity, relegated to a subordination relation with the male subject, and sustained by gender binarism. The patriarchal system—supported by the biological model that argues the existence of sex-related differences—confers a set of logics and devices to the body of a newborn person that aim to assign a specific place in the social order, according to his or her sexual categorization as male or female. Historically, public space and the institutions that structure our social systems - governments; health and education systems, public security, economic policies, international relations, knowledge and culture production systems, etc.-are in the hands of men; and domestic and private spaces, together with care and reproduction activities, are relegated to women.

In our research, binarism was a massive methodological wall against which we collided when we began to investigate the archives. The impossibility of avoiding this binary division prevented us from delving into the impact that patriarchy and colonialism had had on the art field in Uruguay (by not being able to identify and assess the participation of other subaltern agents). This meant that after making the absence of women in our narratives visible, we were confronted with an even greater, deeper and harsher systemic violence: the non-existence decree. If there is no place in the categorization for other genders, races, classes, etc., it is because there is not even the possibility of them being.

The reasons escape the art field itself. Patriarchy has designed and executed many operations to normalize a gender polarization that we are all destined to

exercise, despite the performative impossibility that this implies, since there is no possible success for an individual when reproducing all the mandates and stereotypes implicit in "being male" or "being a woman". And yet, doomed to failure, the mechanism survives and shapes our coexistence. This first categorization will be promoted and sustained throughout the person's existence by the rest of the institutions and powers of this system. The feminist view on historical cultural production will seek to shed light on the violence in the dynamics that create meaning -committed to perpetuating this "natural" and unequal order based on sexual differences, while at the same time bursting into the patriarchal processes of representation, in order to re-signify the oppressed social subjects. We recognize then two major effects that patriarchy has imposed on historical cultural processes, which we were able to confirm in our artistic account after the research. First, the images and narratives around women have been created from the male gaze, which is necessarily symbolic and arbitrary, and are always aimed for their pleasure and convenience. In her book *Alicia ya no* Teresa de Lauretis, pioneer of *Queer* thought and critic of cultural representations, argues that women are not present in these male fictions, but that our uncomfortable place is that of spectators, between the gaze and the image (De Lauretis, 1984, 113). This ideal woman, a male construct for his own satisfaction and control, is alien to material women, to the concrete historical subjects she represents, and there is no direct relationship between them (de Lauretis, 1984, p. 16). Women are not present in those images created by patriarchy, but also, and this is the second effect, they are not present in their creation. We do not identify ourselves in those images because we were not allowed to produce or intervene in them either.

Since the famous 1971 article *Why have there been no great women artists?* by art historian Linda Nochlin, feminism has been shedding light over concrete patriarchal mechanisms that have banished women from artistic production spaces. The very question that gives the text its title is a trap set by the author, as she proposes to assess the art field from the very perspective that was created by white men: there were no women artists, and if there were any, they were not great ones. Reaching this conclusion by taking a glance at the universal artistic tradition implies "naturalizing whatever *is*", says Nochlin, assuming as "natural" the mechanisms that built those traditions and that underlie the logics for determining who is considered to be an artist, and having a scale that determines who are the best within that system. The factors that have defined our art field as it is purely cultural and patriarchal, and the results in

terms of who are the best artists, the great themes, the great formats, and their mechanisms of aesthetic validation, management, distribution, etc., are merely functional to the system itself. Historicizing the artistic production of men and women under the criteria created by the sexist system itself implies assuming an unfavourable response for women before starting. It means ignoring the fact that access to artistic production was forbidden to this gender.

At the same time, there is an artistic mythology that reinforces the "natural" suitability of white men to be great artists, based on the idea of "genius" artists, endowed with a divine gift from the cradle, or artists of great feats and resistance to their social conditions -families, class, etc.-, who achieved mastery in their work despite social setbacks. These stories that historians love to revive do not acknowledge the dynamics that characterize the patriarch system in the art world. How many of these great artists were direct relatives of professional artists (being then exempted from class fees and easily admitted)? How many of them had the support of patrons who provided the economic means to dedicate to researching and producing art? How many of these artists had the availability of time and resources because they were not determined by social mandates that imposed other tasks on them, or distanced them from the spaces for training, creating and discussing art? The emergence of these great artists and their masterpieces, Nochlin concludes, is due to a privileged social situation, determined by institutions and concrete and definable social contracts, such as art academies, patronage systems, aesthetic valuation scales, classical themes and formats, or mythologies around genius men (Nochlin, 2001, 77).

Reality was different for women, who were forbidden access to training and work spaces; they were not allowed to attend private meetings with men, to study naked bodies, or to study anything that did not comply with their mandates, that is, the tasks of reproduction and care -being this last term understood in its broadest spectrum; caring for children, their husbands, their homes, the elderly and their sick relatives, and also caring for the harmony and beauty of domestic spaces or those shared with others-. In her 2018 text, *Feminismo y arte latinoamericano,* Andrea Giunta argues that the art world works as a screen for the violence that exists in society. Symbolic violence constitutes an effective way to eliminate dissident voices, and in the case of art, it materializes through exclusion, disqualification, disavowal and invisibilization processes (Giunta, 2018, 23). Women were not allowed to dissent, give

their opinion, vote, propose, resolve or criticize. They could not think and express two fundamental actions when talking about art. Does this mean that there were no great women artists? No. It means that there was no intention of seeing them, let alone recognizing them. While some could flirt with the formats and themes of what is considered art (generally because of kinship with their masters), that kind of art that is bought and sold, commissioned, exhibited, and compiled in dissertations and retrospectives, had no place for those artists who had the time and resources to cultivate and exploit their creativity, technical mastery and spiritual acuity in the spaces for which they were destined. The hands that embroidered, knitted, sewed, molded ceramics and painted them; inside their homes, in sewing meetings, in spinning workshops (and every other possibility outside the canon), would never be revived or named by the hegemonic narrative.

Several art critics conclude—and we at COCO agree—that the proposal outlined by feminism should not only aim to rescue dissident artists from the hegemonic narrative to include them in the history of patriarchal art, which would imply perpetuating the sexist gaze; but to evidence the patriarchal logics that impose inequality, in order to propose an absolute deconstruction process that constitutes us all as subjects with equal rights and possibilities. In the case of visual arts, and following De Lauretis, this would mean to finally get a hold of our own representations and their significance processes, thus laying down the conditions to enable the creation of a new and realistic social subject, which articulates the "female subject" (historically created by and for men), based on historical and material women, and finally destabilize the hegemonic fictions.

Decolonial Feminist Criticism in Latin America

The Latin American feminist perspective is different from that of the global north. The origin of our art history is dominated by a colonial narrative that proudly proclaims itself the heir of European art. As Bolivian feminist activist and co-founder of *Mujeres Creando*, María Galindo, points out, "one cannot decolonize without depatriarchalizing" (Galindo, 2013, 97). Both types of violence are overlapped within our national identities in a particular way that needs to be analysed with caution, avoiding the historical innocence towards the masculinized narrative around colonialism, which proposes a history of connections between the conqueror, protagonist and master, and the colonized, victim and vassal. A history of heroes and

feats, which forgets about the pre-Columbian patriarchy[1]. By carrying out a deep analysis on the trace of patriarchal structures that already existed in our lands before the arrival of the Spaniards -that were later sustained by the colonial process-, we will get to understand the depth of colonialism. The adaptations of cultural, religious and political patriarchal institutions and mandates of both cultures -original and Spanish-, imposed and adapted between one and the other, maintain as a fundamental principle the control over women's bodies by regulating the sexual contract and reproduction (Galindo, 2013, 104).

In these adaptation and negotiation processes between both systems, feminized bodies are marked by their gender and class, and by colour and race hierarchies that impose a racial gradation that will have an effect on new levels of perversion and abuse. Even intra-racial relations will be mediated--and disciplined--by the colonial gaze that has permeated all contracts, generating new racist and misogynist dynamics that suppressed all women, and that are maintained by the institutions that still control the relations today (religion, state, family, health system, education, arts, etc.). White women would be considered to own an untransferable aesthetic and erotic capital, being the embodiment of virtue, beauty and holiness, and access to them represented a symbol of power; while non-white women would be considered ugly, available, and access to them was unrestricted (Galindo, 2013,119), losing almost completely the very condition of womanhood by not being the object of male desire. This unequal and violent social order will be reinforced and encouraged by the symbolic productions of incipient Latin American nations, which will continue to produce images and narratives around women, in hands of and for white men, thus bearing great responsibility for individual and collective subjective effects.

[1] According to the evidence so far, we cannot deny the existence of hierarchies based on male privilege in pre-Colonial societies. For example, there also existed the practice of handing over young girls chosen as part of the subordination contract in political processes among native peoples. Galindo cites the case of communities conquered by the Incas (Galindo, 2013, 102), which has perpetuated negotiations between colonized and conquerors.

Decolonial Feminist Criticism in Uruguay

Just like Uruguay, which as a legal and political state, was created in the image and likeness of the colonists, so was the origin of our art as such, founded on colonialist dynamics and aesthetic conceptions. Jacqueline Lacasa, artist, researcher, curator and the only woman director of the MNAV of Uruguay, presents in her book *Influencias (*2015), the national art of that time immersed in the tensions between the prevailing modernism of genealogical discourses, and the thriving practice of artists who, since the second half of the 20th century, were promoting contemporary practices and conceptualizations. The struggles or coexistence between both discourses through state terrorism reach the 21st century, where an artistic device still persists, which is functional to its modernist origins and whose ideological-cultural interests remain as a system of valuation and therefore as a system of aesthetic control. "The first half of the 20th century is marked by research in sculpture and painting, disciplines lacking, in most cases, any women representation, and by a rich hegemonic production between what was the school of the Círculo de Bellas Artes and the Escuela del Sur of the master Joaquín Torres García" (Lacasa, 2015, 15-16).

What are the dynamics used to create and sustain an art obsessed with a foreign tradition? Undoubtedly, enunciation is one of them, constantly naming the relations, similarities, legacies or "riches" that come from European art is a permanent practice in the validation of our art and its artists. Jacqueline Lacasa uses the term "active nostalgia" to describe that strong admiration for the Eurocentric intellectual world that leads to a "filial dogma" which is difficult to overcome, where "institutional referents in art maintain the homeostasis of the canonical system from the perpetuation of the dynamics and instruments of that system, securing the secondary benefits implicit to this conservatism" (Lacasa, 2015, 12). From these psychological-emotional concepts, which are also political, we find the validation of local productions based on their closeness to the European-North American canon. The biographies of our artists are riddled with comments about their involvement in this or that movement in Europe, their encounters with famous artists of the 19th and 20th centuries, their participation in exhibitions in northern cities.[2]

[2] The obstinacy to validate their trajectories from this canon is enormous, for example, in the case of Guiscardo Améndola, one of the artists present in the commemorative exhibition of the centenary of

In 2011, for example, on the occasion of the centennial of the MNAV, a commemorative exhibition was held that brought together a hundred works representing the first hundred years of Art in Uruguay. In its catalog, we can read the reflections and chronologies by the Minister of Culture at the time (Ricardo Ehrlich), the former Minister of Culture (María Simón), and those who were in charge of the museum from 1969 to the present. There is consensus among all of them regarding the selection of works: although it leaves many pieces out, it is a representation of our artistic journey. This journey shows that of the eighty-five artists selected, almost 80% went on study, training or “artistic” trips to Europe, and almost 40% did so with a grant from the Uruguayan government (MNAV, 2011). That is to say, the State stimulated, provoked and financed the European influence on its artists in a bet towards the "enrichment" of contents and forms of local production, which will determine and further establish the European model as a measure of the evolution of our art, placing it proudly within a "universal" canonical tradition. In this journey, national art was not only imbued with the styles, avant-gardes, themes and supports that were common in Europe, but also with its circulation and marketing logics, its value system, its institutional and disciplinary structures, and even with the political, social and cultural interests that determined the artistic production of those latitudes.

The recognition of this colonial origin and persistence we speak of is an analysis that was already recognized in the spaces of reflection and art criticism in Uruguay in the mid 20th century. In 1969, María Luisa Torrens, a renowned teacher and art critic, commented on this in the national newspaper *El País as* a result of an art exhibition in Montevideo called *Ottocento, la respuesta uruguaya*. In her critique, the author acknowledges the impregnated colonialism, and taking it even further, she narrates with great insight how, although the 19th century had been of great revolt in Europe, "liberating art from all schemes and preconceptions, liquidating the ‘great

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the MNAV, who was born and died in Montevideo (and of whom we found no evidence of any trips abroad), but whose Wikipedia entry indicates that he is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts of Naples, from where his Italian father did graduate before settling in Montevideo, with whom he studied and trained in Uruguay.

themes'' and validating the presence of all men [sic], from all social classes and of all colours" (Torrens, 1969, 1); In Uruguay, the story was quite the opposite, and involved resorting to the Academy to lay the foundation for our art, in what Torrens deems a serious mistake that results in a paintings without pathos, without emotion, devoid of nerve and reduced to a historical document.

> The Academy, which has been resisted in France since the first decades of the 19th century, becomes the desideratum of these incipient countries. This delay of a century, this lack of synchronization, will last for another century and a half, as the distance becomes gradually shorter. The mediocre pictorial awakening of our country is influenced both by the presence of traveling artists from the peninsula, who raised expectations, and the absolute lack of a cultural policy.
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> If Blanes, instead of going to Italy as he did, had worked with Courbet, for example, the history of painting in the last century would have been very different. But at that time, the idea of artistic training prevailed, the idea that it was absolutely necessary to start from a finished apprenticeship in drawing and painting, and only then the expression could be released. It was believed that men [sic] had taken centuries to evolve to the level of the masters of the Renaissance, and the intimate proposal of all the national creators of the last century was to follow the path with effort" (Torrens, 1969, 1).

In 1979, Ángel Rama, Uruguayan writer, critic and editor, even spoke of the "acriollamiento."[3] process in which we were immersed, a model deepened by decolonial criticism that analyses the adoption of the colonizer's gestures in the forms and contents adopted by the colonized. Rama reflects on how Ibero-European colonialism in the arts relegated indigenous and African cultures in our territories to traditionalism and folklore (Rama, 1979, 8-9). These considerations are given in a context of maximum turmoil in all areas, and his thinking in the face of cultural colonialism is especially pessimistic, where the only thing possible when facing the

[3] From the word *criollo,* which names local people descending from Europeans. The term refers to the process whereby local culture and customs start to gain influence within foreigners.

"American void" that implies the impossibility of "abandoning what is already integrated as a mental structure and hierarchy of value to the creative personality", is the inclusion of some elements of our culture to the hegemonic elements of European and American cultures, a minimum original contribution that would give the note of exoticism, a place where the colonizers still like to place us (Rama, 1979, 8).Today, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, Latin America is in a different place. The spaces for the production of thought and culture have worked tirelessly to disassociate themselves from the colonial matrix of power, to transcend the "initiatory trauma", as Lacasa called it. From the authors of decolonial thought and the activism alive in the streets, the arts and culture in general, a transformation took place, turning the collective subjectivity towards a separation from that deforming mirror that is the colonizer. The historically patriarchal and colonial culture dedicated to fostering and deepening the mechanisms of domination and privileges of males over other genders, or whiteness over other skin colours, etc., is now the battlefield where the colonial origin is made evident, rejected, and above all, relocated in a new conceptual order. From the moment we were able to use words, it has been possible to name forgotten subjectivities, naturalized violence, imposed infamies. Latin America, once a mere note of cultural exoticism, is today the quarry to which people from the North turn to reformulate and rethink the historical modes that have plunged society into endless social and environmental crises -that endanger life itself as we know it. Community, sisterhood, diversity, what is multiple, anthropology beyond what is human. Modes foreign to European humanism in ruins, today gain strength from the Latin American ancestral resistance to become valid options that counteract the decadent patriarchal and colonial historical arrogance.

COCO: Diagnosis

The data that make up the history of art in Uruguay, deployed for the first time as a whole by this research, allowed us to problematize the violent mechanisms used in the construction of our field of art, and question ourselves: Are we free from reproducing them? Is a collective and first-person construction of a story possible? What happens when the common threads of a story that sustains the historization of a territory become evident and unravel? Is it possible to replace history with multiple stories that allow an amorphous, diverse and undefinable identity of a territory? This

book sets up a dialogue between COCO's work and that of art referents in Uruguay and the region, to continue thinking and projecting ourselves, imagining an art of all and with all, and to promote concrete actions towards equality and diversity that permeate from art to the whole society.

From this project which begun in 2016, we have activated several actions with the purpose of making visible the precariousness and invisibilization to which the field of art submerges us for being dissidents to the hegemonies, of uniting with others to enhance the impact of the resistance, and to propose, together, strategies that may heal this body–currently in the process of rehabilitation–that is art in Uruguay. Since we founded the collective, we have participated in Feminist Conferences, given talks in schools, workshops for children, showing the work of Uruguayan women and gender dissident individuals in different cities around the world; we work together with Wikipedia (universal contemporary and collective encyclopaedia) to include gender perspective in articles referring to art in Uruguay. We participated in programs and seminars at the University of the Republic, collaborated with several public and private art institutions, collaborated with artists, published articles in peer-reviewed journals, participated in new collectives, opened dialogues, and above all, we have transformed ourselves and our practices.

In 2018, *Archivo X* was born, a project that brings together dissident artists in an online platform of simple and intuitive design, collective and collaborative, with the aim of making visible, energizing and activating the legacy of subjectivities relegated from the hegemonic narrative and turning it into public heritage. *Archivo X* does not try to position itself as a new narrative, or as a substitute for the previous one, but rather as another voice in addition to the existing and future ones. It remains mutable and mutant, nourished by our views and by exchanges with other people and collectives. It is our political intention to constantly question its construction, to leave it open to new questions arising from our theories and practices. As of today, the platform has almost two hundred dissident artists and continues to grow and position itself as a subversive reservoir in reaction to the hegemony of the normative narrative.

In August 2019, with the few material resources that characterize the production of art in Uruguay, we held the first exhibition of the research, whose name, *Atlas X*, made reference to the constellation of data and events that articulated the construction of the history of art in Uruguay. Through a rhizomatic structure, open to non-linear readings, intuitive, aesthetic and conceptual combinations, we exposed the

gender inequalities that dominated, until then, the field of national art. We executed artistic interventions with data on walls, displayed printed and underlined documentation pointing out the violent mechanisms. We created a *Wall of Exclusion*—with the phrase written in neon on the wall—which was filled with experiences of gender-based violence suffered by visitors in their interactions in the art field. There was also a small graphic art market and an exhibition with *Archivo X* artists. A table with our books and art publications intervened with the percentage of representation of women artists. The *Atlas X* experience was as fleeting as it was effective, from it emerged new dialogues, concerns, and proposals to enhance the scope and depth of our project.

In 2019, after seeing the *Atlas X* record, Andrea Giunta meets with us on several occasions in Montevideo to discuss the spaces of feminism and women in art in Uruguay, and invitesus to participate in the 12th Mercosur Biennial, *Femeninos, Acciones y Afectos,* based in Porto Alegre. From that experience of having our personal books intervened, the work is systematized in a piece we call *Iletradxs*. An art installation that exhibits a large selection of publications related to the field of art in Uruguay and Latin America, intervened with a colour code that indicates the percentage of women represented[4]. The action demonstrates the asymmetry of representation of women artists in publications related to the field of art and its evolution, confirming the structural epistemic violence from the registry and historical documentation.

This journey, which we began in 2016, is full of exchanges, artistic and academic collaborations, fruitful encounters and, above all, the affection of working in sisterhood. The hand of many was always outstretched towards our most primary concerns and doubts, they shared their knowledge and experiences, they trusted us and joined our project. Thanks to the generous wisdom of many Latin American and Spanish women thinkers, included in this book through the interviews conducted, we have come to understand the importance of the feminist perspective in our history,

[4] Green when there is gender equity (greater than or equal to 50% representation of women), yellow when the percentage is between 30% and 49%, and red when the percentage is between 0% and 29%.

and we have begun to recognize the local and regional particularities that demand a profound critique of historical oppressions that have to do with our colonial past, which persist to this day.

In 2020, and thanks to the interest, trust and support of Patricia Bentancur, who was then Director of the Exhibitions Area of the Centro Cultural España (CCE, for its Spanish acronym), we were able to carry out a major exhibition entitled *RIP (Revise, Investigate, Propose)*, which collected our work so far, allowing us to set up a dialogue with the work of Margaret Whyte and her monumental work *Ser y no estar*, and invite new dissident voices in our artistic narrative that would enhance the impact of our criticism. Then, *Narración* was born, a space within *RIP* where a succession of exhibitions of Afro-descendant artists curated by Mayra Da Silva, *queer* artists curated by Luisho Díaz, and artists working on native peoples, curated by Teresa Puppo took place. Traversed by the Covid-19 pandemic, *RIP* was on display from August to November of that year on the first floor of the CCE and was accompanied by talks, guided tours, workshops for the whole family, and performances. From this powerful experience arises this book, the possibility of compiling what we have worked on and comparing it with others. To record our voices, the voices of all of us in these pages, and include them in the artistic narrative of Uruguay, sowing new paths of thought and action that promote a narrative created by all of us and for all of us.

The quest to understand the patriarchal mechanisms that constitute our cultural being has been as intricate as it has been empowering and rewarding. The challenges have ranged from methodological difficulties in accessing data, defining theoretical lines for an analysis outside of a thinking dominated by the subjectivity of the white American-European male, to the reticence of some people who view gender perspective with suspicion, or assume a personal rivalry against masculinity or whiteness, perhaps for fear of losing privileges. We believe that this project contributes in the right direction to the work that is being done together in many areas, towards a more equitable and just future for all people.

Equal rights and real access for all identities oppressed by the colonizing patriarchal privilege is a demand that can no longer be ignored by the system in general, nor by the institutions. Since we made the data revealing violence visible, it has been impossible to ignore the relevance of projecting real equality in our practices. But above all, there is the overwhelming force for change that emerges from the

communities, the collectives, the streets, the spaces of action and exposure, which no longer give room for impunity or indifference.

The field of art, as we knew it, is dying. RIP.

Interview with COCO – English version

Interviewer: Solange Gulizzi

COCO is an Uruguayan art collective founded in 2018 and currently includes three female artists: Catalina Bunge, Natalia de Leon, and Maria Mascaro. COCO takes up Linda Nochlin's question, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" and gives it a regional twist by focusing on the heteropatriarchal structures that have historically dominated the art scene in Uruguay. Though this question was raised 40 years ago, the battle is not over.

COCO's work and activism takes them from interventions in schools to art galleries and public libraries. One of their latest and most significant projects, "Archivo X" ["X File"], is a form of practice-based research that aims to highlight misogyny, homophobia, classism, transphobia, and racism in the historiography of Uruguayan art. They also curate exhibitions and exhibit their own work individually. They have most recently published a book titled *RIP: Una crítica desde el feminism decolonial al arte en Uruguay*

What does COCO mean, and how did the name come about?

COCO means many things. It's a name made up of the syllable "CO" that refers to the infinite possibilities of being and existing as feminist women (ribs—COstillas--, vulva—COncha--, contemporary—COntemporáneo--, collective--COlectivo, etc.). It's a playful name with a rebellious spirit, and that's where it comes from.

How did each of COCO's members individual artistic practice and personal interest in gender issues arise?

Natalia de León: My practice arises from photography and film. Photography started as a childhood interest (family-related), and film came later from my university studies. As I began to develop my artistic practice, questions began to plague my mind. Those questions led to more questions, which in turn lead me to explore my practice from an artistic, philosophical, and emotional perspective. Today, my activities englobe academic research through a master's in philosophy, artistic practice through the film lab at the Contemporary Art Foundation.

Catalina Bunge: I began my first steps in contemporary art at the Contemporary Art Foundation (FAC), an artistic collective based in Montevideo. From the beginning, my art practice was marked by an interest in curatorial and discursive aspects of art. I define myself as a conceptual artist who is very dynamic in choosing a medium to convey my ideas. My interest in gender issues emerged as a collective concern—especially with Nati and Pity (María Mascaró)—when we observed the invisibility of female artists in Uruguayan art narrative.

María Mascaró: I started as a self-taught artist, focusing on painting. I joined the workshop of Guillermo Fernández (a student of Joaquín Torres García), where I met local artists. In 2004, I lived in London for two years during the era of the Young British Artists, which significantly impacted my artistic career. Back in Uruguay in 2012, I joined FAC, marking a turning point in my art. I began creating works in various media (installations, objects, photography, videos, etc.), in addition to painting, taking ...

I understand that COCO emerged as a response to the patriarchal, racist, classist, and heteronormative culture in Uruguay. COCO engages in activism and resistance, and in your text, "Diagnosis," you mention feeling that the art field demanded that you be something you are not. What did you feel it was asking you to be, and who are you?

The problem is not only that it demanded things from us (sometimes more than it did from male artists), but also that it didn't represent us. Hegemonic art focused on themes detached from our realities and feelings. And this wasn't just about us as female artists; other minorities, like the Afro-descendant community, the queer community, and Indigenous peoples, also experience this exclusion. Symbolic violence is evident in the way we are spoken to (language), the spaces given to us, and how we are validates us as artists.

What is COCO's perception of the reception of your work, touching on a subject that is still sensitive in our society? Have you noticed any difference in the perception of your work over the years?

The very genesis of COCO arises from a feminism on the rise in the field of art in Uruguay. Feminism not only because of the themes, but above all because of the dynamics; collective work, community as opposed to competition, sorority as opposed

to fraternity, etc. This meant that our actions were received with great enthusiasm within the art community in Uy and society in general, because they embodied a widespread and urgent practice.

The enthusiasm of the artists and the academy was always supportive, that of the general public, and of many men within the art field, was sometimes skeptical or dismissive, as if it were a fad. When it was understood that feminism was installed, that is to say now, a more difficult stage of reaction and resistance to the discourse of equality and diversity began. To understand oneself as part of the hegemonic logics, and to decide to move away from the places of privilege, is perhaps the most difficult movement for those who hold power, and counter-discourses emerge, polarizing opinions and generating hatred.

Now that feminism is installed as an ideology and discourse in Uruguayan society and the struggle is no longer to establish it, how does COCO reposition itself in its artistic and activist practice?

Although feminism has advanced as an ideology in Uruguay, patriarchy is very powerful and gender inequalities are still very noticeable. Even more so if we move away from the capital and get to know the situation in other departments of the country.

Within the field of art, COCO has positioned itself as a feminist collective and we have built our discourse with data that are compelling. There is still a long way to go to reverse the data of the research we conducted on Uruguayan art with a gender perspective. There is still more to be done outside the field of art, with the rest of society and that is what we are working on, proposing new ways of working that are not only theoretical or utopian, proposing the collective over the individual, creating community, collectively accompanying personal struggles or those of other collectives that occur within art in Uruguay. To propose new forms in the discourses, to avoid the elitist gap that contemporary art often proposes in its texts and narratives, to dedicate a little more effort and time to find the women who are invisible or forgotten in every step that is taken; to reference women theorists, women artists, to validate ourselves among women and dissidences before referring to the classic examples, which are generally white men, etc.

How did the idea for Archivo X come about? In your archival work, did you find what you expected or were you surprised by something?

The idea of Archivo X arose as a concrete action to intercede in the hegemonic and violent narrative (misogynist, transphobic, classist, racist, transphobic, homophobic, colonial, etc.), to activate a dynamic that would respond to our question of what happens if multiple narratives are enabled to support the historicization of a territory, instead of a discourse associated with an established power.

Perhaps the biggest surprise was to find ourselves assuming the roles we wanted to avoid, such as selecting, classifying, ordering, colonialist operations of conservation and tradition, from which it is difficult for us to escape, because they are the ones we know.

We found a lot of receptivity from the collective of artists in general and especially from women artists and dissidents. The immediate support from them and from other agents, organizations and institutions was also a pleasant surprise.

Regarding the moment in which you discover yourselves in the role of power in which now it is you in particular, and women in general, who have the opportunity to rewrite history—as you say "now that you have found yourselves in roles you wanted to avoid" and from which you say you find it difficult to escape because of the roles you already know. How do you work/manage/reflect on this new social position in which you discover yourselves?

We work on the constant revision of our professional and personal practices, seeking to position ourselves and move from sorority, empathy, affection and collective work. It seems fundamental to us to create networks and collaborate with other artists, researchers and historians to activate dialogues, and to be able to build among all of us a fair, equitable and diverse field of art**.**

What was the emotional process of each one as the research progressed?

De León: At first it was to integrate feminism as a new way of understanding the world. What they always say, once "the veil falls", it is very difficult to sustain any of the social dynamics. Then it was to move from the place of victim of patriarchy (as a woman, where I did not exist as the creator of women's own representations, but neither in the representations themselves, images created by men to fulfill their

desires—I am quoting Teresa de Lauretis here—), to understand myself as a privileged one in a system of oppressions much more complex than the male-female sexual difference. The colonial, racist, transphobic, transphobic, homophobic, classist logics, which impose hatred to one's own existence, and annul any possibility of realization by the simple fact of existing in a world that is violent to everything that departs from the norm, confronted me with that place of being lucky for being a white, middle class, university educated woman, etc. This affected my relationship with my artistic practice, but fundamentally as a woman, mother, friend, sister, etc.

Bunge: I think that at the beginning we advanced timidly, listening to an intuition that told us that there was a problem, that the solution was there and that it was collective. My “activism” on gender issues is inseparable from COCO. With each step we took with COCO, both in research and in the concrete actions we developed (Archivo X, RIP, Workshops, Conversatorios, etc.), the flame that moved us and the certainty that change was possible, and that there were many of us who were fighting for it, was affirmed. As Nati says, once you face the problem and you are aware of the logics that dominated us and that without questioning we continue to endorse them, it is very difficult to return to your “normal” life of privilege, so to speak; inevitably you start doing other things, you get together with other people or you stop having conversations. The feminist gaze requires a constant revision of our artistic and personal practices, ways of speaking, thinking, and relating to others.

Mascaró: I share everything that Natalia and Catalina said. In my particular case, while working on gender issues I discovered that I had been a feminist since I was a child. My first feminist action I remember was refusing to make my brother's bed and rebelling against my mother and father for that. Working it in art, made me aware that I always criticized inequalities, and art was a way of salvation to be able to express myself in that sense. My artistic process was accompanied by my individual process and collective work. It was vital to meet other women and dissidents to awaken that desire to fight that I always carried inside me, to make things change.

Interview to Coco – Spanish version

Entrevistadora: Solange Gulizzi

¿Qué significa COCO? ¿Y Cómo surge el nombre?

COCO significa muchas cosas. Es un nombre compuesto por una sílaba “CO” que alude a la repetición infinita de posibilidades de ser y habitar como mujeres feministas (costillas, concha, contemporáneas, colectiva, etc). Es un nombre lúdico con un espíritu rebelde y de ahí nace.

¿Cómo surge en cada miembro de Coco su práctica artística individual y su interés personal en cuestiones de género?

De León: Mi práctica surge desde la fotografía y el cine. La fotografía como un interés desde niña (familiar), y luego el cine desde mis estudios en la universidad. La propia práctica despertó preguntas que despertaron nuevas preguntas que me llevaron a investigar desde la práctica artística, filosófica y afectiva. Hoy confluyen en mi actividad la investigación académica desde una maestría en filosofía, la práctica artística desde el laboratorio de cine del fac (fundación de arte contemporáneo) y mi práctica afectiva que finalmente es la que motiva todo, y da sentido a mis producciones.

Bunge: Comencé mis primeros pasos en el arte contemporáneo en ella Fac (Fundación de arte contemporáneo), colectivo artístico basado en Montevideo. Desde los inicios mi práctica artística fue atravesada por un interés en lo curatorial y lo discursivo de la obra de arte. Me defino como una artista conceptual muy dinámica a la hora de elegir un medio para plasmar la idea de obra. El interés en cuestiones de género surge como una preocupación compartida colectivamente –y puntualmente con Nati y Pityi– al percibir la invisibilización de artistas mujeres en el relato artístico –y la historia del arte– uruguaya. Esta problemática de naturaleza social y cultural, es revisada de manera muy personal influenciando mi práctica artística y curatorial. El anhelo de querer modificar esta realidad creo que generó en mí el interés suficiente para generar acciones concretas como COCO y sus diversos proyectos.

Mascaró: Comencé haciendo arte de forma autodidacta, me dediqué a la pintura e ingresé al Taller de Guillermo Fernández (Alumno del Taller de Joaquín Torres García) donde conocí artistas del medio. En el 2004 viví en Londres por dos años, en la época de lxs Young British Artist y eso provocó un cambio muy importante en mi carrera artística. En 2012, ya en Uruguay, ingresé al fac y es a partir de ahí que mi arte da un giro. Comencé a realizar obras de diferentes técnicas (instalaciones, objetos, fotografía, videos, etc) además de la pintura , a tomar clases de arte contemporáneo (que continúo hasta el día de hoy) y a vincularme colectivamente. Acompañada de un desarrollo personal y afectivo, mi obra se vuelve conceptual, autobiográfica, y feminista. En 2016, la vida me une a Cata y Nati y es junto a ellas (COCO) que continúo mi camino de aprendizaje en el arte y con los temas basados en género que me interpelan como artista y como persona.

Entiendo que COCO surge como una respuesta a la cultura patriarcal, racista, clasista y heteronormativa en Uruguay. En COCO hay activismo y resistencia, y en su texto *Diagnóstico* cuentan sentir que el campo artístico les exigía ser lo que no son. ¿Que sienten que les exigía ser y quiénes son?

El problema no es solo que nos exigía (inclusive más que a los varones artistas), sino también que no nos representaba. El arte hegemónico se ocupaba de temas ajenos a nuestras realidades y sentires. Y no hablamos solo de nosotras como artistas mujeres, otras minorías como el colectivo afrodescendiente, el colectivo queer o los pueblos originarios también sufren esa suerte. La violencia simbólica está presente en como se nos hablaba (el lenguaje), los espacios que se nos son dados y como se nos valida como artistas.

¿Cuál es la percepción de COCO sobre el recibimiento de su obra al tocar una temática que todavía es sensible en nuestra sociedad. ¿Notaron alguna diferencia entre la percepción de su obra a lo largo de los años?

La génesis misma de COCO surge de un feminismo en auge en el campo del arte en Uruguay. Feminismo no sólo por las temáticas, sino sobre todo por las dinámicas; el trabajo en colectivo, la comunidad en contraposición a la competencia, la sororidad frente a la fraternidad, etc. Esto implicó que nuestras acciones fueran

recibidas con mucho entusiasmo dentro del arte en Uy y de la sociedad en general, porque encarnaban una práctica extendida y urgente.

El entusiasmo de las artistas y de la academia fue siempre de apoyo, la del público general, y de muchos varones dentro del campo del arte, fue a veces de escepticismo o ninguneo, como si fuera una moda. Cuando se comprendió que el feminismo estaba instalado, es decir ahora, comienza una etapa más difícil, de reacción y resistencia al discurso de equidad, diversidad. Entenderse parte de las lógicas hegemónicas, y decidir correrse de los lugares de privilegio, es quizás el movimiento más difícil para quienes sustentan(mos) el poder, y surgen los contra-discursos, que polarizan las opiniones y generan odio.

¿Ahora que el feminismo está instalado como ideología y discurso en la sociedad Uruguaya y la lucha ya no es por establecerlo, cómo se reposiciona COCO en su práctica artística y activista?

Si bien el feminismo ha avanzado como ideología en Uruguay, el patriarcado es algo muy poderoso y las desigualdades de género aún son muy notorias. Más aún si nos alejamos de la capital y conocemos la situación en otros departamentos del país.

Dentro del campo del arte, COCO se ha posicionado como una colectiva feminista y hemos construido nuestro discurso con datos que son contundentes. Falta mucho para revertir los datos de la investigación que realizamos sobre el arte uruguayo con perspectiva de género. Queda aún más por hacer fuera del campo del arte, con el resto de la sociedad y en eso estamos trabajando, proponiendo nuevas formas de trabajar que no sean solo teóricas o utópicas, proponer lo colectivo sobre lo individual, crear comunidad, acompañar colectivamente las luchas personales o de otros colectivos que se dan dentro del arte en Uruguay. Proponer nuevas formas en los discursos, evitar la brecha elitista que propone el arte contemporáneo muchas veces desde sus textos y relatos, dedicar un poco más de esfuerzo y tiempo para encontrar a las mujeres invisibilizadas u olvidadas en cada paso que se da; referenciar teóricas mujeres, artistas mujeres, validadarnos entre mujeres y disidencias antes de hacer referencia a los ejemplos clásicos, que en general son varones blancos, etc.

¿Cómo surge la idea para Archivo X? ¿En su trabajo de archivo, se encontraron lo que esperaban o se sorprendieron con algo?

La idea de Archivo X surge como una acción concreta en la que interceder en el relato hegemónico y violento (misógino, transfóbico, clasista, racista, transfóbico, homofóbico, colonial, etc.), en activar una dinámica que respondiera a nuestra pregunta de qué sucede si se habilitan múltiples relatos que sustenten la historización de un territorio, en lugar de un discurso asociado a un poder establecido.

Quizás la sorpresa más grande fue encontrarnos a nosotras mismas asumiendo los roles que queríamos evitar, como seleccionar, clasificar, ordenar, operaciones colonialistas de conservación y tradición, de las que nos cuesta correrno s, porque son las que conocemos.

Encontramos mucha receptividad por parte del colectivo de artistas en gral y sobre todo de artistas mujeres y disidencias. El apoyo inmediato de ellxs y de otrxs agentes, organismos e instituciones fue también una grata sorpresa.

Respecto al momento en que se descubren en el rol de poder en el que ahora son uds en particular, y las mujeres en general, quienes tienen la oportunidad de re-escribir la historia—como dicen uds. "ahora que se encontraron en roles que querían evitar" y de los cuales dicen les cuesta correrse por ser los roles que ya conocen. ¿Cómo trabajan/manejan/reflexionan sobre esta nueva posición social en las cuales se descubren?

Trabajamos en la constante revisión de nuestras prácticas profesionales y personales, buscando posicionarnos y movernos desde la sororidad, la empatía, lo afectivo y el trabajo colectivo. Nos parece fundamental crear redes y colaborar con otrxs artistas, investigadores e historiadores para activar diálogos, y poder construir entre todxs un campo del arte justo, equitativo y diverso.

¿Cómo fue el proceso emocional de cada una a medida que avanzaba la investigación?

De León: En un principio fue integrar el feminismo como una nueva forma de entender el mundo. Eso que siempre dicen, una vez que "se cae el velo", es muy difícil sostener cualquiera de las dinámicas sociales. Luego fue pasar del lugar de víctima del patriarcado (como mujer, donde no existía como creadora de las propias representaciones de las mujeres, pero tampoco en las propias representaciones,

imágenes creadas por el hombre para cumplir sus deseos –estoy citando a Teresa de Lauretis acá–), a entenderme una privilegiada en un sistema de opresiones mucho más complejo que la diferencia sexual hombre-mujer. Las lógicas coloniales, racistas, transfóbicas, homofóbicas, clasistas, que imponen el odio a la propia existencia, y anulan toda posibilidad de realización por el simple hecho de existir en un mundo violento a todo lo que se aleja de la norma, me enfrentaron a ese lugar de afortunada por ser mujer blanca, clase media, universitaria, etc. Esto afectó mi relacionamiento con mi práctica artística, pero fundamentalmente como mujer, madre, amiga, hermana, etc.

Bunge:_ Creo que al principio avanzamos tímidamente escuchando una intuición que nos decía que allí había un problema, que allí estaba la solución y que era de manera colectiva. Mi ”activismo" en cuestiones de género es inseparable de COCO. Con cada paso que avanzábamos con COCO, tanto en la investigación como en las acciones concretas que desarrollamos (Archivo X, RIP, Talleres, Conversatorios, etc), se afirmaba la llama que nos movía y la certeza de que el cambio era posible, y de que éramos muchxs quienes estábamos luchando por ello. Como dice Nati, una vez que te enfrentas al problema y que sos consciente de las lógicas que nos dominaron y que sin cuestionar las seguimos avalando es muy difícil volver a tu vida “normal” de privilegio por así decirlo; inevitablemente empezás a hacer otras cosas, te juntas con otra gente o dejas de tener conversaciones. La mirada feminista requiere una revisión constante sobre nuestras prácticas artísticas y personales, modos hablar, pensar, y relacionarse con el otrx.

Mascaró: Comparto todo lo que dijeron Nati y Cata. En mi caso particular, al trabajar en temas de género descubrí que había sido feminista desde pequeña. Mi primer acción feminista que recuerdo fue negarme a tenderle la cama a mi hermano varón y rebelarme contra mi madre y mi padre por eso. Trabajarlo en el arte, me hizo ser consciente de que siempre critiqué las desigualdades y el arte fue un camino de salvación para poder expresarme en ese sentido. Mi proceso artístico fue acompañado de mi proceso individual y del trabajo colectivo. Fue vital conocer a otras mujeres y disidencias para despertar esas ganas de luchar que siempre llevé dentro mío, para que las cosas cambien.

“More Women’s Work”: Feminised Labour and the Corporatisation of Feminist Discourse in Lucy Beech’s Moving-Image Practice

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Abstract

In this article, I focus on women’s labour, a key aspect that has been central to both feminist art and activism, and one that can presently be examined in relation to the problematic alignment of feminism with neoliberalism. In particular, I consider the notion of the “feminisation” of labour that is often used to describe the centrality that emotion has come to occupy in the workplace since the beginning of the twentieth century, among other aspects such as flexibility, precarity and serviceability. Donna Haraway (1991) presciently described such an economic system that values characteristics typical of jobs exclusively done by women as “homework economy” and, more recently, Eva Illouz (2007) has spoken of “emotional capitalism” to define the contemporary climate in which emotional and cognitive skills have increasingly become sources of capital. While the categorisation of such a set of values as “feminine” risks to re-enforce essentialising and universalising readings of gender that assign specific qualities to women on the basis of what is falsely perceived as a biological inclination, with this article I wish to consider how this newly-celebrated value system, when taken as descriptive rather than prescriptive, can provide some useful tools to redefine the distribution of power in a predominantly patriarchal world order.

Such a dualism is explored in the context of Lucy Beech’s moving-image works that employ a pseudo-documentary form to critically analyse the marketisation of “feminine” values and the corporatisation of feminist discourse in the contemporary climate of emotional capitalism and neoliberalism, and the specific role that women play within this economy. In my analysis, I concentrate on three works by the artist that show a development in Beech’s thinking around notions of emotional labour, care and the communitarian as they are played out within female communities that operate

under a predominantly neoliberal structure, while they also strive to provide alternative forms of organisation. These works are the *Cannibals* (2013), *Me and Mine* (2015) and *Reproductive Exile* (2018), which all explore relational and power dynamics within small, female communities—an all-women support group, an awards ceremony that celebrates women's contribution to the British funeral industry, and a fertility clinic in the Czech Republic—to investigate the collective and caring possibilities enabled by such alternative forms of organisation, as well as their limits, as they often end up reproducing hierarchical, exclusionary dynamics.

In a 2013 article for the Guardian titled "How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden—and how to reclaim it," American philosopher Nancy Fraser lamented the increasing convergence of feminist ideals with neoliberal goals in the Anglo-American socio-cultural panorama.[1] Such a convergence, Fraser argued, shifted feminism's focus away from collective justice and toward individual achievement, presenting career progression and economic gain as the benchmarks of equality. As Fraser writes: "[w]here feminists once criticised a society that promoted careerism, they now advise women to "lean in". A movement that once prioritised social solidarity now celebrates female entrepreneurs. A perspective that once valorised "care" and interdependence now encourages individual advancement and meritocracy."[2] Fraser's article laid out the contradictions of a new feminist sensibility that was emerging in the early 2010s, and is still influential today, and is now commonly known as "neoliberal feminism." Championed by white, middle- to upper-class, high-powered women who began to publicly identify as feminists—such as Facebook former CEO Sheryl Sandberg and former conservative British prime minister Theresa May—the neoliberal feminist rhetoric presents the workplace and career progression as the privileged arenas for the demand and achievement of equal rights, encouraging women to find

[1] 1 Nancy Fraser, "How feminism became capitalism's handmaiden—and how to reclaim it." *The Guardian,* October 14, 2013, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/14/feminism-capitalist-handmaiden-neoliberal

[2] Idem.

a seat at the table within a dominant capitalistic, patriarchal structure that remains unchallenged.[3] As several theorists, and particularly black feminist critics, have pointed out, such a discourse problematically disavows structural causes of inequality, failing to account for the obstacles that women from different cultural and social backgrounds face in their access to public life and the workplace.[4] Moreover, it de-responsabilises the state, placing instead the responsibility for emancipation solely onto the individual.

Popularised by the increasing mobilisation of feminist discourse by high-profile celebrities, by the proliferation of progressive autobiographies by women CEOs and self-improvement literature that targets a predominantly female audience, as well as by the dissemination of feminist hashtags and slogans across the social media and urban landscapes, the rise of neoliberal feminism contributed to a renewed mainstream interest in feminist discourse across culture and the media, countering what some critics had identified as a "postfeminist backlash" at the turn of the century.[5] Built on the perception that most of the goals of feminism had already been achieved (crucially in a Western context), women had begun to increasingly dissociate from feminist politics that were perceived as obsolete. Neoliberal feminism was arguably allowed to attain such mainstream recognition, in the last decades, because it does not disrupt—but rather works in favour of—dominant capitalist and neo-conservative values. As Silvia Federici has noted, the sponsorship of a feminist agenda by public

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[3] Examples of neoliberal feminist texts are Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013) or Ivanka Trump, *Women Who Work: Re-Writing the Rules for Success* (New York: Penguin Books, 2017). For a critique of Theresa May's reclamation of a feminist identification see Lynne Segal, "Gender, power and Feminist resistance," in *Bodies, Symbols and Organizational Practice: The Gendered Dynamics of Power*, edited by Agnes Bolsø, Stine H. Bang Svendsen and Siri Øyslebø Sørensen (London: Routledge, 2017).

[4] See Bell Hooks "Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In," *The Feminist Wire*, October 28, 2013, https://thefeministwire.com/2013/10/17973/; Dawn Foster, *Lean Out* (London: Repeater, 2015)

[5] For discussions on the concept of postfeminist backlash see Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992); Imelda Whelehan, *Overloaded: Popular Culture and the Future of Feminism* (London: Women's Press, 2000).

institutions has served to “channel the politics of women’s liberation within a frame compatible with the needs and plans of international capital and the developing neoliberal agenda.”[6]

This article sets out to explore the ambivalent position of women within such a socio-economic landscape that increasingly aligns emancipation with capitalistic and neoliberal values, and considers whether it is possible to maintain a level of resistance even while acting within such an oppressive structure. The present encouragement of women to enter the workforce will also be contextualised in relation to what critics have identified as a “feminisation” of labour in contemporary capitalism, marked by an increased attribution of value to assets and labour conditions that were traditionally associated with women’s unwaged labour—such as care, emotion, and flexibility. These questions will be examined by taking as a case study British artist Lucy Beech’s moving works that are committed to exploring the experience of women within communities that operate under a predominantly neoliberal ideology, all the while holding promises of equality, solidarity and emancipation. In my analysis, I will concentrate on three works by the artist—*Cannibals* (2013), *Me and Mine* (2015) and *Reproductive Exile* (2018)—that cast a light on some key aspects of the contemporary economic climate that particularly affect women’s labour: the commodification of well-being and emotion in what sociologist Eva Illouz has termed “emotional capitalism;” the re-evaluation of “feminine” values as sources of capital, and reproductive labour[7]. In my analysis, I will try to show that the portrayal of the relational and power dynamics that sustain female communities and individuals operating under a neoliberal logic in these works not only problematises the alignment of feminist discourse with the neoliberal cult of individualism and self-improvement, but also allows for the possibility of forging alternative spaces of solidarity and emancipation even within such oppressive socio-economic conditions.

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[6] Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 98.

[7] For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of ‘feminisation’ of labour see Jane Jenson, Elisabeth Hagen, and Ceallaigh Reddy (ed.), *Feminization of the Labour Force: Paradoxes and Promises* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988); Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

First, I will address the entanglement of therapeutic and economic discourses in the context of the all-women support group portrayed in *Cannibals* to consider how women's empowerment is increasingly being presented as an individualistic, therapeutic and entrepreneurial endeavour that aligns emancipation with capitalistic goals. In this context, embodiment, toxicity, self-destruction emerge as means to disrupt normative logic that often sustains well-being discourses. Secondly, I will turn to *Me and Mine* to address the celebration of feminine qualities in the workplace and the gendered power imbalance that persists within professional settings, in spite of the increased inclusion of women in the workforce. I will consider the ambivalence attached to the notion of "feminine" values that, on the one hand, can reinforce a prescribed attribution of roles to women in society on the basis of what is wrongly perceived as a natural inclination towards practices of care, while on the other hand, it might provide an alternative to a dominant masculinist value system. Finally, I will turn to the question of women's reproductive labour in *Reproductive Exile* to consider how contemporary biotechnologies can be used as points of leverage to transform oppressive socio-biological conditions, while the global fertility industry simultaneously runs the risk of reproducing centre-periphery exploitative dynamics of a global capitalist economy.

Toxic femininities: The Defiance of Well-being Governmentality in *Cannibals*

"So, you newcomers today, you will all be starting out as appetizers, and the older members of the group—as you know—you will be main courses, and this month, I'm the desert." This line introduces the organisation of the all-women support group that is the subject of Lucy Beech's 14-minute video *Cannibals*, revealing from the outset one of the central quandaries of the work: the persistence of a hierarchical organisation even within supposed feminist initiatives for solidarity and women's empowerment. The work follows a group meeting that takes place in the backyard of the group leader Helen's house, recording the rituals that the women undertake as part of their journey of self-improvement [Fig. 1]. In developing the subject of the work, Beech was inspired by her research around the real-life online community Women Empowering Women (WEW), a pyramid investment scheme exclusively directed to women that was active in the UK in the early 2000s. Like many other women-only pyramid investment schemes that were popularised around that time, WEW adopted

the language of female empowerment and a therapeutic ethos to encourage women to invest in an unsustainable business model.[8]

Fig. 1 Lucy Beech, Cannibals, 2013 (still). HD video with sound, 15'.

The phenomenon of women-only pyramid investment schemes is emblematic of the co-option of feminist goals by a neoliberal rationality: it configures emancipation as an individualistic endeavour, solely dependent upon women's will to improve their condition, disregarding structural barriers that prevent women's equal treatment in society, and presents economic gain as the benchmark of empowerment. As Catherine Rottenberg concisely puts in it her study of neoliberal feminism, neoliberalism "moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents," and produces political subjects that are "individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing [...]; entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being".[9] When such a discourse is applied to a feminist agenda, it problematically shifts the attention away from collective demands for equal rights and social justice, to embrace instead personal goals, such as well-being and financial self-realisation (often realised at the expense of other

[8] The UK government put a ban on WEW and similar pyramid investment schemes as they were high-risk and fraudulent. See Tracy McVeigh, "Pyramid selling scam that preys on women to be banned," *The Guardian*, August 5, 2001; 'Women Beware Women,' *The Economist*, July 12, 2001.

[9] Catherine Rottenberg, *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2018), 7.

members of the community), ultimately allowing for an empowered female subjectivity only insofar as it serves a capital-enhancing logic.

The female community represented in *Cannibals* mirrors the ethos and hierarchical structure of Women Empowering Women, however it ironically transfigures it in metaphorical terms, replacing the accumulation economic capital with food consumption in order to expose the exploitative nature of such initiatives that, under the guise of feminist empowerment, support instead a capitalistic, neoliberal logic. *Cannibals* opens with the group leader Helen's illustration of the ethos of the group and the structure of the meetings: upon joining the scheme, each woman is assigned a course that they are asked to impersonate according to their hierarchical position in the pyramid. Each meeting consists in the performative enactment of a "feast" during which the members undergo a series of therapeutic rituals—a "marinating process" as Helen describes it—that involve smoking, gargling salt water, and applying electrodes to their bodies, as members of the group take turns to share painful experiences and fears that are presented as the causes that prevent their affirmation in society. Over the course of the meetings, the members can be upgraded to a different category according to the number of new recruits they bring to the group. As a member reaches the status of dessert and graduates, Helen promises that they will have gained the necessary "emotional support" and "full financial benefits" that will enable them to reinvent their life.

The language employed by the group, which presents emancipation as being dependent upon personal wellbeing, mirrors a common trope in neoliberal feminist discourse that identifies the causes for women's unequal position in society as being entirely dependent on the subject's behaviour—for instance, on a lack of determination or fear of assertion—and, in turn, presents investment in self-care and self-improvement the solution. The therapeutic ethos of the group's rituals reflects what sociologist Eva Illouz describes in *Cold Intimacies* as the increased transfiguration of feminist demands in therapeutic terms, which has contributed to the individualisation of feminist politics and responsibility to the detriment of collective mobilisation and state accountability.[10] Within this framework, aspects internal to the subject—such as

[10] For more on the increased use of therapeutic discourse in contemporary culture see Frank Furedi, *Therapy Culture: Cultivating Vulnerability in an Uncertain Age* (London: Routledge, 2004); Sara

negative emotion, mildness, and unproductivity—are presented as the only obstacles to women's equal social recognition.[11]

Such a logic is reflected in the individualistic focus of the group portrayed in *Cannibals*, where the women's fears and insecurities are pathologised as the causes that prevent them to assert themselves in society. During one of the healing rituals, Dorothy, the most recent addition to the group and protagonist, describes the reason that led her to join the group: she speaks of her fear of entering buildings with more than one floor, a fear of "ascending," which inevitably leaves her frozen at the bottom. She explains that she joined the group to get the money to buy a bungalow, because she will always be scared of climbing up, afraid of the "crash." The economic terminology that constellates Dorothy's intimate account and evokes ideas of social climbing and economic collapse is emblematic of the aforementioned neoliberal rhetoric that presents inequality as the result of individual responsibility, and, consequently, configures emancipation as an entrepreneurial endeavour.

Spectators are invited to identify with Dorothy's point of view: at several points in the narrative, a voiceover gives spectators glimpses into Dorothy's personal impressions, characterised by a sense of scepticism towards the group's ethos and methods. Beech's camera repeatedly draws the attention to Dorothy's doubtful expressions through close-up shots as she participates in the group activities, and often juxtaposes it, by way of sudden jump-cuts, to Helen's assured and zealous demeanour, framing Dorothy as the critical counterpart to Helen [Fig. 2]. In her refusal to enthusiastically buy into the narrative of positivity and progression put forth by the group leader—Helen speaks of the meetings as moments of "positive sharing," an example of the co-option of happiness as an instrument to enforce a neoliberal governmentality—Dorothy could be said to perform the function of what Sara Ahmed

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Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004); Ole Jacob Madsen, *The Therapeutic Turn: How psychology altered Western culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[11] Ivanka Trump, for instance advises to deploy 'savvy self-investment and entrepreneurial strategies of self-care' to enhance their human capital (quoted in Rottenberg, 2018:143), while in *Lean In*, Sandberg (2013), speaks of 'ambition gap' to convey the sense that women's unequal position in society is related to their lack of assertiveness.

defines, in *The Promise of Happiness*, as “feminist killjoy”.[12] Describing a cultural landscape in which happiness is increasingly mobilised to enforce capitalistic, neoliberal normativity, Ahmed argues that “feminists might kill joy simply by not finding the objects that promise happiness to be quite so promising,” thereby challenging dominant narratives of wellbeing and broadening the range of choices available to individuals.[13] Thus, to Ahmed, consciousness-raising should function as a “consciousness of unhappiness” aimed at revealing and disrupting the political agenda concealed in the promise of happiness.[14] Dorothy’s negativity and scepticism enact this critical function, that is fully realised in the character’s embrace of intoxication and self-destruction.

In a later scene, as another member takes the floor to talk about her poker addition, Dorothy’s voiceover conveys her thoughts as she is smoking a cigarette, ironically as part of the healing ritual: “Try to imagine the air being pulled through the cigarette, between each piece of tobacco, through its core, and then out into my mouth. I concentrate on it moving down my throat, down into my chest, and then I get ready to push it out again. I am preparing my body, as Helen said.” The deep, meditative tone of Dorothy’s voice guides the spectators to *feel* with her, rather than partake in the group’s organised therapeutic process. Against the prescriptive structures of the group rituals, Dorothy’s singularity, and a sense of empathy, emerge through embodiment that is crucially evoked in an instance of intoxication, rather than cure. In her study on therapeutic aesthetics, Maria Walsh emphasises the potential of toxicity to provide a form of resistance against assimilation, against the normative agenda that often pushed forth by well-being discourses.[15] Walsh outlines a tradition of appropriation of toxicity by minority groups that served to preserve singularity against the danger of assimilation that often accompanies demands for social recognition. To illustrate the conundrum of recognition without assimilation, Walsh evokes Antke Engel and Renate Lorenz’s notion of “becoming-indigestible,” which

[12] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), 50.

[13] Ahmed, 65

[14] Ahmed, 70

[15] Maria Walsh, *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021)

identifies “the paradoxical moment of being incorporated, yet not built into the system”.[16] In this sense, “the toxic—resisting being digested and split up into useful parts that can be integrated into the system— turns out to be a means of either changing or, maybe, destroying the system from within”.[17]

Thus, toxicity appears in *Cannibals* as a means of self-determination and cultivation that counters the assimilative aspect of well-being. In her role of feminist killjoy, marked by her negativity and alliance with toxicity, Dorothy embraces such a potential, showing how criticality can be maintained even within systems—such as the one portrayed—that under the rubric of healing and social inclusion enforce an ideal of neoliberal, capitalistic governmentality. Such an aspect of embodied resistance and subtraction from a capitalist logic of betterment and growth is fully realised in the final sequence of the work, which also constitutes its sensuous climax. As anticipated by Helen in the beginning, the meeting ends with a feast during which the women are asked to eat the dishes they represent. The rhythmic sound of the drums accompanies this voracious banquet that disrupts the composure of the group: a sequence of close-ups shows the women’s mouths voraciously biting into the food, accompanied by the sound of swallowing and chewing [Fig. 3]. As the rhythm of the drums gets faster, Dorothy’s voice-over recounts the action: “We are consuming ourselves. I am the blinis. Biting my own smoked flesh, chewing through glands and tissue, I swallow, and take another bite. Suddenly I feel like a fool. Seems peculiar, the shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, via numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings, devouring ourselves”.[18]

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[16] Antke Engel and Renate Lorenz, “Toxic Assemblages, Queer Socialities: A Dialogue of Mutual Positioning,” *e-flux*, Issue #44 (2013): 10, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/44/60173/toxic-assemblages-queer-socialities-a-dialogue-of-mutual-poisoning/.

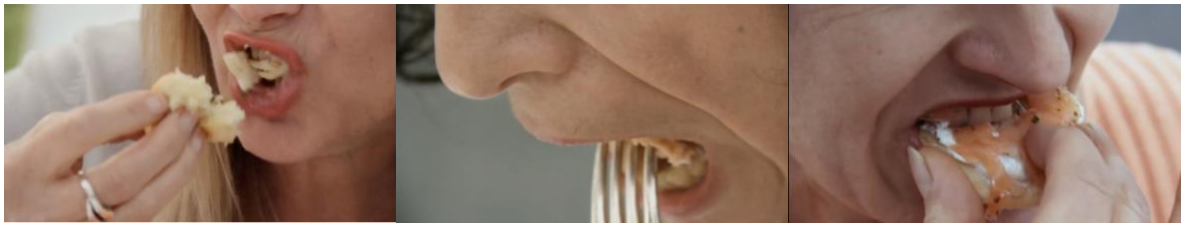
[17] Engel and Lorenz, 10.

[18] Part of the quote is taken from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press: [1965] 1984), 11

Fig. 2 Lucy Beech, Cannibals, 2013 (stills). HD video with sound, 15'.

Dorothy's account contains a quote from Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World*, where the literary theorist outlines the "logic of the inside out" that informs his concept of the carnivalesque and points to the subversion of moral and cultural values by the celebration of what is often perceived as "low" or inappropriate.[19] The final uncontrolled, abject moment of self-consumption in *Cannibals* holds such a subversive power, as hierarchies are suspended, as the women collectively indulge in this self-destructive act that removes them from the logic of accumulation that defines group's capitalistic ethos. However, the metaphor of self-consumption also emphasises the exploitative workings of neoliberal feminist initiatives—such as the one portrayed—that capitalise on women's social and emotional struggle, only to eventually convert them, through the promise of emancipation, into empowered consumers. This becomes clear in the end, as the video ends with a shot of Helen carefully arranging her intact dessert back into the fridge: hierarchies are restored back into place, as Helen's wealth is preserved as a result of the other member's sacrifice.

[19] The concept of carnivalesque has been reappropriated by feminist scholarship as a framework to define some motifs and methods that recur in feminist artworks, such as playfulness, performativity, parody, participation, and the celebration of the grotesque and the portrayal of taboo aspects of culture related to embodiment and sexuality. See, for instance, Marcia Tucker (ed.), *Bad Girls* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art/Cambridge: MIT Press: 1994).



Lucy Beech, Cannibals, 2013 (stills). HD video with sound, 15'

Such a bittersweet ending leaves open the question of whether it is possible to resist reproducing the exploitative logic that sustains such initiatives that promise empowerment only insofar as it aligns with neoliberal, capitalist values. *Cannibals* exposes the contradictions that underly supposedly alternative initiatives for women's empowerment that ultimately end up reproducing the same dynamics of the hegemonic ideology they wish to oppose. However, Dorothy's character and the carnivalesque moment of the feast introduce the possibility of remaining critical and unassimilable even when acting within such oppressive systems. Dorothy's "consciousness of unhappiness," and her alliance with toxicity, function as consciousness-raising tool that disrupt the assimilatory power of the narrative of positivity put forth by Helen, therefore opening up the possibility to act otherwise. Embodied experience is configured as a site of resistance, always escaping disciplinary narratives. The collective, unregulated, cannibalistic urge of self-consumption reveals the potential to subvert hierarchies and rules. A shared embodied experience of destruction becomes the ground onto which solidarity can be achieved in a way that is importantly removed from a neoliberal, capitalistic logic of production and accumulation.

In her analysis of Beech's work, Walsh rightfully remarked that the practices of self-improvement portrayed by the artist, "while serving capital, also afford opportunities for women, albeit of a certain class, to assemble and perform group work in which they might acquire a provisional autonomy that is not simply subservient to capital or a means of professional development".[20] In this sense, *Cannibals* configures a form of resistance that cannot be separated from hegemonic structures, but instead acts from within the very oppressive logic it wishes to dismantle—the neoliberal

[20] Walsh, *Therapeutic Aesthetics,* 172.

discourse of self-improvement and the related marketisation of emotion—in order to provide a critique of it and reformulate it in different terms. Thus, by mimicking the exploitative structures that define therapeutic group practices aimed at producing well-functioning, capital-enhancing individuals, Beech's work suggests how temporary moments of embodied proximity and solidarity can emerge even from constraining systems, offering a possible way out of the impasse that views emancipation as doomed to reproduce the all-pervasive market ideology that characterises the neoliberal socio-cultural climate.

Women Do It Better? *Me and Mine* and the "Feminisation" of Labour

After having explored the possibility of countering the normative agenda of well-being pushed forth by neoliberal feminist discourses of empowerment, this second section will address another key aspect of neoliberal feminist rhetoric: the celebration of women's contribution in the workplace. This is the main theme of *Me and Mine*, a 40-minute video that follows an award ceremony for the celebration of women's contribution to the funeral-care industry, and highlights the complexity of navigating male-dominated professional environments as a woman.[21] The contradicting dynamics of the event that aims at building a sense of community and solidarity among the women in the industry, but at the same time promotes individualistic affirmation in the competitive structure of the awards ceremony, provides Beech with the ideal setting to explore her recurring interest in the hierarchies that are reproduced by empowerment discourses that are sustained by a neoliberal logic. Employing a pseudo-documentary form, Beech's investigative lens records the relational dynamics of such a microcosm to more broadly address the question of women's roles within an economic system that increasingly capitalises on values that have traditionally been associated to female experience—i.e. nurture, care, and emotional support—and often promotes women's entry into the labour market only insofar as it sustains a patriarchal distribution of labour that assigns women the role of carers. In my analysis,

[21] In keeping with Beech's research-led approach, the work takes inspiration from a real-life event attended by the artist: The Ideal Death Show/The Good Funeral Awards, an annual event and awards ceremony that celebrates excellence and innovation in the British funeral industry.

I will concentrate on how *Me and Mine* problematises the production of masculinity and femininity as distinct emotional cultures, while I will also consider whether an attention to "feminine" values, when understood as descriptive rather than prescriptive, can offer an insight into how to redefine the distribution of power in a predominantly patriarchal world order.

By focusing on the funeral industry, *Me and Mine* foregrounds the gendered implications associated with care work and professional roles that entail the management of emotion, drawing the attention to how values traditionally associated with women's unwaged labour—such as care, emotion, and serviceability are increasingly—being presented as valuable assets in the current economic climate of emotional or cognitive capitalism.[22] Several critics have spoken of a "feminisation" of labour to describe the centrality that emotion, together with other aspects such as flexibility, precarity and serviceability, has come to occupy in the workplace since the beginning of the twentieth century.[23] Donna Haraway presciently spoke of the birth of a "homework economy" that values characteristics that were typical of jobs exclusively

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[22] The focus on the immaterial character of contemporary capitalism has been described by different formulations: Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's speak of 'affective labour' to point to the centrality of the manipulation of affect in economic exchanges in Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire (New York: Penguin, 2004), 108. Yann-Moulier Boutang uses the expression 'cognitive capitalism' to account for an economy based on the accumulation of immaterial capital, the dissemination of knowledge and the driving role of the knowledge economy in *Cognitive Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 50. Franco Bifo Berardi talks instead of 'semiocapitalism' to describe the reliance of contemporary economy on 'the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value' in *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation* (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 12.

[23] See also Elton Mayo, *Social Problems of an Industrial Civilization* (Boston: Division of Research, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, 1945); Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press. [1983] 2003). 24 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 166.

done by women (i.e. flexibility, serviceability and care), which increasingly led to the blurring of the domestic and professional spheres. More recently, Illouz coined the term “emotional capitalism” to indicate an economic system where the immaterial labour of care, communication and attention are mobilised to become a source of capital, marked by increasingly precarious and flexible labour conditions, and on the celebration of emotional and cognitive skills as sources of capital.[24]

Me and Mine opens with a still frame: a garage door slowly rolls up, like a theatre curtain, to reveal a black hearse. What follows, is a sequence that captures the meticulous rituals of preparation that precede a funeral procession at Co-Operative Funeral Care, a male-dominated funeral house where Vivian (played by the actress Louise Barrett), the protagonist and only female employee in the company, works. A man dusts the exterior of the hearse, another one cleans and prepares a carriage, while another man brushes a horse. In an ironic reversal, housekeeping tasks are handled by the men, while Vivian stands at a window, looking at them from above, tearing a white shirt apart, perhaps an act of defiance towards white-collar work culture [Fig. 4]. Such a scene could be said to embody what Illouz has identified as a blurring of traditional gender roles in emotional capitalism, as women are increasingly asked to assume managerial positions, while the increasing value that care work has come to assume in emotional capitalism has drawn men towards tasks that were previously considered the exclusive purview of women.[25]

From the opening scene, spectators get the impression that Vivian occupies a marginalised role within the male-dominated workplace (an assumption that will later be dismantled). As the office phone rings, the male workers carry on undisturbed with their tasks, while Vivian is expected to answer and attend to assistant duties. She ends the call with the lapidary sentence: “I’ll let him know,” suggesting that the decisional power still lies in male authority, while Vivian is just a messenger. As the narrative progresses, we learn that Vivian is not only an outsider within the predominantly male workplace of Co-Operative Funeral Care, but also within the female community that she encounters at the Good Funeral Awards ceremony.

[24] Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*

[25] Illouz, 23

A sudden jump cut shifts from the dark and austere atmosphere of Co-Operative Funeral Care to a colourful and loud bus filled with chattering women directed to the awards ceremony. Vivian sits alone, her silence is juxtaposed to the other women's conviviality.

Fig. 4 Lucy Beech, *Me and Mine*, 2015 (stills). HD video with sound, 40'

She overhears a conversation that Helen (Helen Bang, the same actress who played the group leader in *Cannibals*) and another woman are having. Helen is the director of Eco Alternatives, an all-female funeral house that provides alternative, supposedly more caring and empathetic, funeral services. She complains about the lack of sensitivity that men in the industry display: "They don't see a person in the dead, they see the deceased, and that's where we have been needed to step in." She goes on to remark: "The men, they don't have the same level of understanding, the same level of care, the same level of therapeutic knowledge." Helen's binary discourse that juxtaposes male and female emotional cultures embodies the tendency to perpetuate, even under the rubric of female empowerment, an essentialist view of gender difference, a logic that resonates more broadly in the ethos of the award ceremony and the workshops in which the women are asked to take part.

In her study of emotional capitalism, Illouz convincingly argues that social arrangements are also emotional arrangements and notes that "the social hierarchy produced by gender divisions contains implicit emotional divisions, without which men and women would not reproduce their roles and identities."[26] Illouz insists on the idea that the social and cultural division between masculinity and femininity is created and sustained by emotional cultures that assign different attributes to the two genders (i.e. rationality and aggressivity to men, and emotionality and kindness to women). These

[26] Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*

divisions are then translated into a value system that sets male emotional culture as the standard. *Me and Mine* exposes how this essentialising view problematically persists within neoliberal feminist narratives that end up replacing the hegemony of an emotional culture with another. By claiming the superiority of "feminine" values, such a discourse establishes a narrow conception of femininity as a universal standard.

Are the women free to access the job market on their own terms, or are they simply asked to step into men's shoes and re-enact the same power dynamics of the very oppressive system that marginalises them? Is the rhetoric of professional success bound to assimilate them to an exploitative neoliberal and capitalistic system? These are some of the critical points that the work unpacks by presenting different attitudes towards the idea of inclusion. Mirroring the dualistic structure of *Cannibals*, Helen and Vivian embody two contrasting positions: if Helen proposes a radical alternative to the hegemonic masculinist system through the institution of a women-only space, Vivian enacts a form of resistance that operates *within* the very traditional, patriarchal structure that marginalises her.

Jill Dolan's categorisation of feminist approaches in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* can be useful to define Helen and Vivian's respective positioning.[27] In the book, Dolan distinguishes three categories of feminist discourse: liberal, cultural, and materialist, and the first two seem to be embodied by Beech's characters. Vivian's seamless integration within the male-dominated environment of Co-Operative Funeral Care, her unchallenging compliance with the system and hierarchical structure of the funeral house, represent a liberal feminist stance that, as Dolan explains, "rather than proposing radical structural change, it suggests that working within existing social and political organizations will eventually secure women social, political, and economic parity with men."[28] Liberal feminism advocates for gender equality on the basis of shared, universal human values and its goal is the achievement of equal representation of women in mainstream political and social life. Dolan identifies some criticalities in this discourse, namely its limited scope that aims to assimilate women to a patriarchal system that remains unchallenged, and the backlash attitude that often defines the attitude of the women embodying this ideology, who tend to resist feminist

[27] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012). 29

[28] Dolan, 3.

identification as it is considered a threat to their seamless integration within (male) universal claims.

Cultural feminism, instead, focuses on female difference and “proposes that there are, and should be maintained, clear differences between men and women which might form the basis of separate cultural spheres.”[29] This is the ideal embodied by Helen’s discourse that blatantly celebrates the superiority of feminine values and advocates for a feminisation of the funeral industry. Dolan notes that “cultural feminism is founded on a reification of sexual difference that valorizes female biology, in which gender is an immutable, determining, and desirable category.”[30] So if the goal of liberal feminism is the subsumption of women to the male universal, cultural feminism proposes instead a reversal of power, claiming the superiority of feminine values and positing them as the new norm. This discourse also presents several critical points, as it universalises and essentialises womanhood, perpetuating a biological ideal of gender that is presented as the universal model of womanhood, thereby flattening or outright disregarding differences among women.

The cultural feminist approach is also shared by the majority of women attending the awards ceremony and is reproduced in the language employed during the group-building activities they take part in [Fig. 5]. As part of the events that lead up to the ceremony, the women are asked to participate in a workshop on communication. The workshop leader introduces the session by speaking of women’s natural gravitation towards communication-based jobs. She mentions “flexibility” and “porousness” as characteristics that make women great communicators and emphasises the importance of empathy in the industry. The workshop leader’s words reflect an essentialist interpretation of femininity that attributes an inclination to self-effacement and care-work to the perceived porousness and openness of the female body. The biases that emerge from such a discourse reveal how narratives of female empowerment run the risk of reproducing a limited view of femininity, in this case one that is defined by emotionality and nurture. The question remains of whether the concept of “feminine” values is bound to remain confining epithet or whether it can be used to revolutionise and propose an alternative to a hegemonic patriarchal system.

[29] Dolan, 5

[30] Dolan, 6.

The managerial language used during the workshop to describe and quantify emotion, as well as the performative nature of the workshop activities where the women are asked to preform specific emotional responses in relation to made-up scenarios, already challenge the conception of emotions as natural, innate, and pre-cultural. Emphasis on the possibility to commensurate, commercialise and command emotions in the workplace begs claims of naturalness. If one abandons an essentialist view of gendered emotional cultures as biologically determined, the celebration of emotion and "feminine" qualities within the workplace and social sphere can then be considered in its potential to overthrow, rather than reinforce, traditional social and moral hierarchies that hold male qualities as the standard. Continuing on her analysis of how feminine values have been incorporated in management culture and valued within the public sphere, Illouz comes to the conclusion that the communicative ethos of emotional capitalism not only orients "the manager's self to the model of traditional female selfhood," but it also "*blurs gender divisions* by inviting men and women to control their negative emotions, be friendly, view themselves through others' eyes and empathise with others."[31] Thus, although it continues to promote capitalist focus on the accumulation of wealth and a measure of success in economic terms, emotional capitalism appears to overthrow the binary gendered power imbalances upon which capitalism was originally predicated.

The question remains of whether those feminine values, once assimilated to a capitalistic logic and elevated as the new norm, risk reproducing similar power dynamics to the patriarchal model they sought to oppose and of which they are now part, particularly its individualistic and hierarchical ethos. Vivian's marginalisation within the women's community raises this issue. From one the participants' snarky comment on Vivian's participation to the event—"I heard that the Co-Op is sending someone down this weekend as well. I bet she'll have a good look around!"—we gather that Vivian's position within the industry is not considered progressive enough by the other women to consider her an ally to their cause. The difference symbolised by Vivian also allows Beech to challenge the archetypal view of femininity advanced by the group: her silence, discomfort and difficulty in communicating and challenge the cultural ideal that perceives women as naturally good communicators. Afraid of the other women's judgement, Vivian tampers with her nametag, folding it to hide the

[31] Illouz, 23.

mention of her workplace. In a later scene, for the second time, we see Vivian standing alone at a window. This time, she is in her hotel room, and she is observing the women parading to the awards ceremony in full gown. Transparent screens are a recurrent motif in the work that symbolises the invisible barriers that prevent Vivian's integration in both the male-dominated environment of Co-Operative Funeral Care and, perhaps more surprisingly, in the community of women funeral workers.

Fig. 5 Lucy Beech, *Me and Mine*, 2015 (still). HD video with sound, 40'.

Mirroring the climactic structure of *Cannibals*, the narrative tension centred around Vivian's exclusion and discomfort is temporarily released in the ending, particularly in two moments that realise the sought-for experience of solidarity. Once again, a sense of community is not achieved in the participation to regulated and institutionalised group-building initiatives, but through physical proximity experienced when structures of governmentality are suspended or challenged. During the awards ceremony's after party, after having kept at the margins during most of the event, Vivian joins a conga line of women dancing to a rhythmic, electronic beat [Fig.6]. The engaging, electronic soundtrack suggests an idea of pre-conscious, spontaneous relationality: the women are drawn together, joined together, in a shared moment of playfulness, removed from the neoliberal circuit of productivity perpetuated in the managerial ethos of the awards ceremony and group-building activities. To take a break from the dances and celebrations, the women head out to the terrace and Vivian, in a freeing impetus, jumps into the hotel pull fully dressed: a liberatory act of self-expression that puts an end to the restrained attitude she had displayed thus far. This freeing gesture coincides with the loss of her nametag that remains floating on the surface of the water. In an act of cleansing, a kind of prophane baptism, Vivian is

reborn, freed from apparatuses of identification and the value judgements attached to them.

Fig. 6 Lucy Beech, *Me and Mine*, 2015 (stills). HD video with sound, 40'.

This liberatory moment comes to a quick end as Helen retrieves Vivian's nametag and hands it back to her the next morning at breakfast, unfolded so as to reveal the information that Vivian had attempted to conceal. Identification cannot be escaped, it inevitably returns and reinstates the power play that governs relationality. However, after a moment of discomfort, the silence between Helen and Vivian is broken and their conversation ends with an act of mutual acceptance: "I'm glad you came," Helen admits. "I'm glad I saw it," Vivian replies. The camera pans out, moving further away from Vivian and Helen who are left chatting at the breakfast table. Their dialogue fades out and is replaced by a loud sound of drums. As the camera cuts to the next frame, we learn that the sound is accompanying a funeral procession led by Vivian. The loop structure of the narrative brings the spectator back to the beginning, to the funeral service that was initially being prepared and is now underway. Only in this final shot, we learn Vivian's role within the funeral house: she is the funeral director, leading the cortege, dictating its pace, followed by her co-workers. The abrupt jump cut that brings the spectators back to the environment and routines of Co-Operative Funeral Care gives a sense of the often short-lived and limited scope of initiatives such as The Good Funeral Awards, a contingent microcosm of advocacy for women's empowerment and social restructuring whose dynamics cannot always be easily translated to everyday life scenarios, such as the male-dominated context of Co-Operative Funeral Care.

Moving forward from the harsher criticism of the corporatisation of feminist discourse and the commercialisation of therapeutic practices in *Cannibals*, Beech has

explained that in *Me and Mine* she wished to display a more positive attitude towards the communitarian potential of group initiatives, albeit co-opted by a neoliberal and capitalistic logic. As she explained in an interview with the author: “Moving onto something like *Me and Mine*, there is a more positive dimension in terms of looking at the strength that comes through collectivity and solidarity, while there is still an undercurrent of critique around the idea of mechanising empathy and solidarity within the group which fall apart over the course of the event”[32]. The ending of the work reveals that a sense of solidarity can be achieved in these shared, albeit entrepreneurial, spaces. In her analysis of *Me and Mine*, Walsh (2018) notices the ambivalence that characterises those spaces where women are asked to re-appropriate and capitalise upon the same values traditionally used to exploit them. She writes:

> Tapping into and cashing in on the qualities and attributes that women were deemed to possess as nurturers of alienated labour in industrial capitalism, [Beech’s] protagonists both suffer from and milk the technologies that enable them to perform “well” in the spaces of post-industrial labour. Her women find community in these toxic environments, not as class affiliations or political futures, but simply as a resource for surviving and navigating the poisonous yet necessary adaptations to marketisation that characterise life under capitalism.[33]

From a shared experience of discrimination that traditionally assigns women to prescribed roles in society on the basis of supposedly universal “feminine” characteristics, the female community in Beech’s work repurposes these qualities to carve out a space for themselves in a male-dominated work environment and to overthrow the masculinist value system that more generally prevails in corporate culture. However, *Me and Mine* remains critical of the limits of such narratives of female empowerment that present professional success as the chief expression of equality, as well as of the corporatisation of feminist politics and the marketisation “feminine” values aimed at subsuming women’s labour to a capitalistic cycle of

[32] Lucy Beech, interview with the author (unpublished), August 2020.

[33] Maria Walsh, “Lucy Beech,” *Art Monthly* 421, November 2018, 19.

productivity. The scepticism and discomfort of Vivian's character are there to expose these exploitative dynamics, performing—just as Dorothy in *Cannibals*—the critical function of the feminist killjoy that problematises empowerment narratives that reproduce a neoliberal logic of advancement predicated on the association of positive affect with productivity. The inclusion of women in society and in the workforce on these terms does not realise the promise of equality, but simply assimilates them to a masculinist economic structure and furthers a longstanding tradition of exploitation of women's immaterial labour. Silent observers such as Dorothy and Vivian are necessary to remind us of the importance of internal criticism, ensuring that new group formations keep their structure flexible, open to the renegotiation of their terms of inclusion, to prevent alternative structures of organisation from reproducing discriminatory dynamics.

Reproductive Exile: Women's Reproductive Labour in the Global Fertility Industry

To bring my analysis of women's role within the contemporary socio-economic context of neoliberal capitalism, and its emphasis on emotion and "feminine" values, I wish to address a final key aspect of women's work: reproductive labour as it is being reshaped by contemporary technical developments in the global fertility industry. To do so, I will focus on Beech's 30-minute video *Reproductive Exile* (2018), that centres around the cross-border fertility journey of a main character, Anna, who travels from Germany to the Czech Republic in order to get access to surrogacy. Continuing on the anti-naturalistic streak already introduced in *Me and Mine*—in the work's challenge against naturalised conceptions of male and female emotional cultures—*Reproductive Exile* explores the potential that new reproductive technologies and alternative modes of reproduction hold to redefine the conventional gender roles attached to heteronormative ideas of the nuclear family and motherhood, and to challenge an ideal of parenthood based on heredity.

A focus on the globalised and commercial dimension of the surrogacy industry, which reproduces a centre-periphery capitalistic model of outsourcing, allows Beech to also emphasise the class and race inequalities that are sustained by contemporary reproductive policies, showing how potentially liberating technologies are yet again co-opted by the rules of a global capitalistic market. Beech acknowledged that the

inspiration for *Reproductive Exile* came from a recent branch of feminist literature that focuses on reproduction as a fertile site for feminist politics, namely Helen Hester's *Xenofeminsm* (2018) and Sophie Lewis's *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (2018)[34]. Riding the revolutionary wave of these writings, *Reproductive Exile* sets out to debunk the idea of the women's natural inclination towards motherhood, challenging a view of gestation as natural and presenting it instead as a highly technical process. Given the artist's explicit reference of a xenofeminist influence, my reading of *Reproductive Exile* will be informed by three fundamental xenofeminist concepts: techno-materialism, antinaturalism and gender abolitionism.

Starting with techno-materialism, the term indicates a conception of life as technical rather than natural, a view that springs from an understanding of the contemporary body as necessarily entangled with the technical apparatuses that represent and mediate it, that manage and can intervene in its physical and biological processes. Form such an understanding follows a recognition of the socio-political impact that techno-scientific developments hold and Xenofeminism considers "how we might design or appropriate devices, knowledges, and processes for gender-political ends"[35]. In *Reproductive Exile*, Beech assisted reproductive technologies emerge as activist tools that can transform oppressive socio-biological conditions.

The dominant role that technology plays in the reproductive process is evident from the very opening of the work. A still frame shows a phone screen resting on a bed: a woman is filming herself while her partner is giving her a shot, presumably of hormones [Fig. 7]. Notions of naturalness and intimacy that surround traditional accounts of conception are disrupted by the eruption of the technical in the domestic space, substituted by mediation and distance. The biomedical routine of drug-administration replaces the direct physical encounter: physical penetration is substituted by injection. The woman's teary voice declares: "I just don't want to do this, it's just so much work and discomfort. It's just frustrating." The woman's lament conveys an idea of conception as labour.

A jump cut shifts to a sequence that shows the process of equine artificial insemination. A close-up shows the scratched leather surface of an artificial mare or

[34] Helen Hester, *Xenofeminsm* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Sophie Lewis, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family* (London: Verso, 2018).

[35] Lewis, 11-12.

phantom mount, used for horse breeding. A stallion enters the frame. The immobility of the mount is juxtaposed to the thrusting movement of the stallion. The sequence shows the stallion's sperm being collected, packaged, and delivered to a farm where a vet uses it manually fertilise a mare. The parallel established between human and equine assisted reproduction serves to draw out two critical aspects that define the contemporary surrogacy market: the aspect of selectivity and genetic engineering that often determines the choice of the surrogate mother, and the role that economic interests play in the distribution of reproductive rights, two issues to which I will return later.

A similar methodical process of collection, packaging and delivery defines the protagonist's own fertility journey. We encounter Anna for the first time alone, sitting naked in her room, her back turned against the spectator. She is watching a tutorial video that demonstrates how to collect cell samples from her cervix. Holding a mirror to herself, Anna prepares a speculum and proceed with the sample collection [Fig. 8]. This act of self-examination conveys the higher level of agency and control that is enabled by assisted reproduction, while it also pays a homage to a longstanding history of individual feminist health initiatives. In the final section of *Xenofeminism*, Hester discusses this history of feminist self- help health practices, developed in the 1970s, that encouraged women to seize control over the technologies used to manage their bodies. Hester, for instance, talks of women's appropriation of the speculum, a technology invented by men, during collective sessions of self-examination that became a symbol of self-determination against a hostile, patriarchal medical environment that dispossessed women of reproductive rights.[36]

[36] Haraway importantly noted that the appropriation of the speculum was not only symbolic, but first and foremost a practical necessity: 'The repossessed speculum, sign of the Women's Liberation Movement attention to material instruments in science and technology, was understood to be a self-defining technology. Those collective sessions with the speculum and mirror were not only symbols, however. They were self-help and self-experimentation practices in a period which abortion was still illegal and unsafe.' Donna J. Haraway, "The Virtual Speculum in the New World Order," *Feminist Review* 55 (Spring 1997): 42.

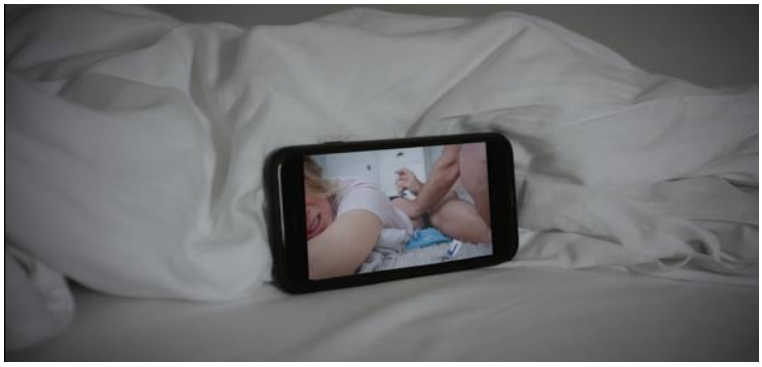

Fig. 7 Lucy Beech, *Reproductive Exile*, 2018 (still). HD video with sound, 30'.

Reproductive Exile tackles the gender bias that historically defined medical experimentation in the field of reproduction. In a key scene, the director of the clinic explains to Anna that the testing of fertility drugs for women mainly relied on male cells and male mice, as female mice were considered to be unreliable due to their hormonal fluctuations. Technology is introduced at this point in the narrative as a means to help bridge this gap: the director introduces Anna to Eve, a 3D model used for drug-testing that reproduces the female reproductive tract. Eve is based on a real-life technology, Evatar, developed by the Woodruff Lab in Chicago. The language used to describe Evatar on the lab's website mirrors Beech's personification of Eve in the work: "She's innovative. She's three-dimensional. She's made out of human cells. She has a functional reproductive tract that includes an ovary, fallopian tube, uterus and cervix. [...] She's the future of drug testing in women and personalized medicine, and her name is Evatar. Just as Eve is thought to be the mother of all humans, Evatar is the mother of all microHumans."[37] The feminisation of the technology and its naming after the biblical figure of Eve, as well as the equation of femininity to motherhood, ironically demonstrate the difficulty of eradicating traditional patterns of thought even within the latest frontiers of science.

Identification between Anna's body and the technological apparatus, their interchangeability, realises the technomaterialist and anti-naturalistic utopia: Eve can act as a stand-in for Anna's reproductive system, while Anna's biological material is embedded in the technology. The camera slowly focuses on Anna's expression, captured by the image of Eve

[37] https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22908742/.

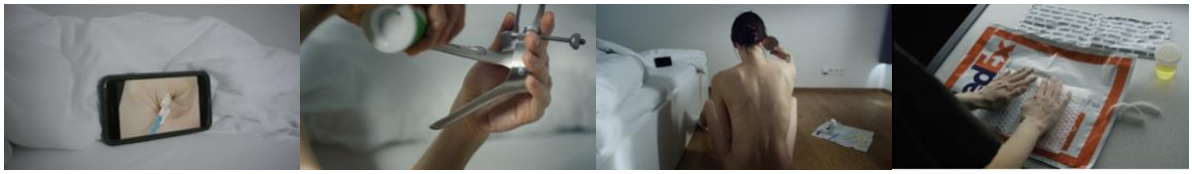

Fig. 8 Lucy Beech, *Reproductive Exile*, 2018 (stills). HD video with sound, 30'.

showing on a screen. The director's voice gets muffled, while an extreme close-up shows the image Eve reflected in Anna's watery eyes, suggesting their symbiotic relationship. The motif of synching recurs throughout the narrative to suggest the seamless merging between human and technology. The focus on this technological prosthetic allows Beech to address the potential of modern biotechnologies to act as correctives of blind spots in the history of medicine, but it also points to their entanglement within the economic system. Beech in fact clarifies that Eve also "functions as something that streamlines care, as a way to create a more individualised patient-consumer medical treatment and to be able to essentially sell more pharmaceuticals through an understanding each individual's body and needs". Thus, the utopian view of reproductive technologies as an emancipating tool is quickly problematised by their entanglement with economic structures.

In an interview, Beech explained:

> You can't really extrapolate the economic dimension of these issues from the social dimension—it is so bound even in something like the idea that within the UK only altruistic surrogacy is legal, there is still a rejection of an economic framework—the dialogues are all very much connected to the economic.

Beech's comment points to the hypocrisy that surrounds legislation around fertility rights, where the economic dimension is often disavowed in favour of claims of naturalness that only risk rendering the procedures more dangerous and less regulated. The director of the clinic emphasises that in the Czech Republic, surrogacy is an option thanks to the legislators keeping things open. It is for this reason that fertility clinics are often built in peripheral states where the legislation is more lenient,

mirroring the logic of outsourcing that characterises global capitalism, and giving rise to the phenomenon of global fertility tourism.[38] In a key sequence, while giving a staff tour of the clinic, the director talks about the liquidation of a number of fertility clinics around the world—the Bank of Thailand, Global Reproduction in Nepal, and Circle Surrogacy in Cambodia—and speaks of her strategic intention to "intercept these clients in reproductive exile, those stateless eggs frozen in limbo."[39]

The economic implications of fertility trade also introduce the question of race and privilege: who is allowed to access fertility treatments? Whose bodies are exploited or excluded from reproduction? A recurrent motif in the work is the idea that patients of the clinic wish for a child who "resembles them." The selectivity implied in the choice of the surrogate mother contains an important racial dimension. In *Full Surrogacy Now*, Lewis makes an urgent point about the unequal distribution of birth rights, referring to a history of governmental control over reproduction. She remarks that "pregnancy has long been substantially techno-fixed already, when it comes to those whose lives really "matter" and speaks of a history of reproductive control and "reproductive meritocracy."[40] She references policies, such as sterilisation, that have historically discouraged or excluded proletarian, immigrant and colonial populations from reproduction, in contrast to the privilege afforded to white, middle-class, Western families who are granted the possibility to safely invest in reproduction. The theme of whiteness is reproduced in the land that surrounds the clinic, made up of imposing, white kaolin rocks that, as the director of the clinic explains, are used to "purify" the

[38] Among the texts consulted for the work, Beech cited the work of medical anthropologist Amy Speier who wrote about North American fertility tourism to the Czech Republic. See Amy Speier, *Fertility Holidays: IVF Tourism and the Reproduction of Whiteness* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

[39] Lewis explains that surrogacy began blooming in 2011, and already in 2016 it began suffering a series of setbacks: Thailand and Nepal banned surrogacy, other major hubs (India, Cambodia, Mexico) legislated against all but altruistic heterosexual surrogacy arrangements. These bans, rather than discouraging baby trade, fuelled it with the only difference of rendering gestational workers more vulnerable than before.

[40] Lewis, 7.

biological hormones provided by the donors. Mention of purification linked to the theme of whiteness evokes again ideals of ethnic cleansing in Western parents' selection of surrogate mothers on the basis of their desire to have children who *resemble them*.

In a later scene, the parallel set in the beginning between horse breeding and assisted is furthered. The patients of the clinic organise an outing to an equestrian trade show. During the show, the speaker introduces the mares and stallions on sale, detailing their genetic makeup—"An imported mare, she has 84.1% of the original genes". The commercialisation of genetic makeup in horse trade invites reflection on the eugenic principles that risk to be reproduced in surrogacy and the selection of biological material in assisted reproduction. Lewis speaks of contemporary iterations of eugenics in surrogacy where white, middle-class women are granted the possibility to safely invest in surrogacy, while urban working-class and black motherhood continues to come under attack and the barriers to black and working-class women's access to contraception and abortion grow more formidable.[41] Women from peripheral states or disadvantaged communities often find themselves in the position of having to commercialise their body for First-World parents to realise their dream of having a child that resembles them.

Beech's interest in the commercialisation immaterial labour and affect returns in *Reproductive Exile* with a focus on how the fertility industry is dependent upon the labour of often invisible bodies: the animals onto which the drugs are tested, the women providing the biological material for fertility drugs, the body of the surrogate mother. The fast cutting that often juxtaposes Anna's body to that of mouse, a horse, and to microscopic images of biological material conveys a sense of interconnectedness between different bodies and living forms, all involved in the process of reproductive labour [Fig. 9]. References to liquidity, to urine and to the biological material travelling from a body into another increases this sense of borderlessness and permeability, challenging categorical separations between organic and inorganic, natural and artificial, human and animal. While the work reveals the pitfalls of the contemporary system of commercial surrogacy in which different bodies seem to be caught in an unequal cycle of exploitation, it also strives to imagine

[41] Lewis, 18.

a utopian form of collective and collaborative reproduction aimed at overthrowing confining notions of biological parentage.

While Anna is attending the horse show, the voiceover gives us access to her thoughts. In an imaginary dialogue with Eve, she wonders about the invisible bodies involved in her fertility journey: “I wonder where these women are, Eve, supplying us with hormones, peeing into bottles. It feels strange that traces of them are moving through my system, and now yours”. She fantasises about the use of menopausal women’s urine in her drugs as it is believed to be rich in hormones that stimulate ovulation, symbolising the body’s resistance against infertility. The motif of urine introduces the concept of abjection that is central to Beech’s thinking around gestation as a simultaneous process of hosting and rejection of foetal cells. In her account of gestation, Lewis also introduces the concept of gestational abject to highlight how the experience of pregnancy is as much an issue of the body saying no to the demands of the foetal cells, as it is working with them. Lewis is fascinated by the “morbidity” of gestating and the ways, biophysically speaking, gestating is an “unconscionably destructive business.”[42] The idea that an abject substance such as urine might be fertile blurs the boundaries between waste and use, between fertility and infertility, overthrowing the value-judgements attached to these categories. Walsh’s theorisation of toxicity can be useful again here to explain how reference to waste and toxicity in the context of reproduction can challenge normative accounts that associate fertility to positivity, disavowing the necropolitical aspect of reproduction. Reference to toxicity also symbolically challenges the purity narrative advanced by the clinic.

Anna’s interior monologue carries on: “Her hormones labouring to stimulate my follicles. More women’s work. Do you think horses are given concentrated human urine so that they can conceive?” Anna’s thoughts bring the attention to the exploitative dynamics at play in a system that capitalises on the biovalue of bodies—particularly female bodies—that are often not rightfully recognised. The monologue raises the issue of the invisibilisation of the traces of labour under global capitalism. In a final scene where Anna is lying on the operation table, waiting to get her eggs removed, she wonders about the biological material moving across Eve’s system and her body: “There you are Eve. My hormones moving through you, like urine pushed through

[42] Lewis, 4.

minerals, soaking up impurities to remove all traces of the woman who donated it. No odour, no colour, she is invisible, we will never meet".

While casting a light on the exploitative dynamics of the commercialised fertility industry, the collective ethos of *Reproductive Exiles* also imagines possibility of multi-species, cross-body alliances that might reconfigure gestation in collective and non-biological terms. Granting a higher level of agency and expanding a definition of parentage that is no longer predicated on genetic inheritance, alternative, technically mediated forms of reproduction contain the potential to overthrow the heteronormative logic that predominantly defines the institution of the family and is sustained by reproductive policies. *Reproductive Exile* is motivated by the utopian desire of reconfiguring parenthood in non-binary, anti-naturalist terms. It participates in Lewiss hopeful call for a fully collaborative gestation: "Let's prefigure a way of manufacturing one another noncompetitively. Let's hold one another hospitably, explode notions of hereditary parentage, and multiply real, loving solidarities. Let us build a care commune based on comradeship, a world sustained by kith and kind more than kin. Where pregnancy is concerned, let every pregnancy be for everyone. Let us overthrow, in short, the 'family.' "[43]

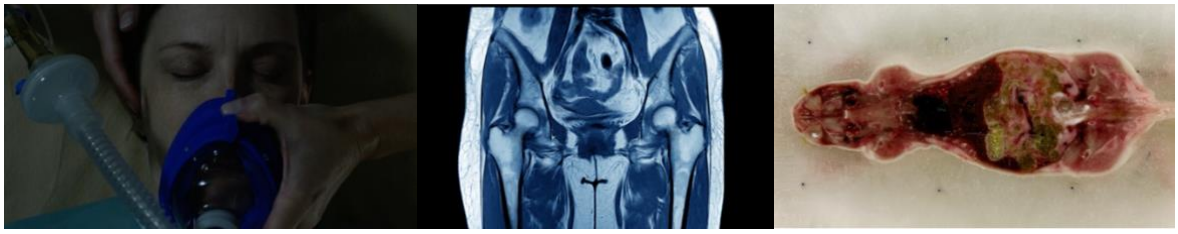

Fig. 9 Lucy Beech, *Reproductive Exile*, 2018 (stills). HD video with sound, 30'.

Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have taken Lucy Beech's moving image practice as a case study to illustrate the complex condition of women's work within a hegemonic socio-economic climate characterised by two main phenomena: on the one side, the feminisation of labour that points to the re-evaluation of what have been conventionally thought of as "feminine" values in the public and corporate sphere; on the other side, the problematic corporatisation of feminist discourse, linked to the emergence of a

[43] Lewis, 26.

neoliberal feminist sensibility that focuses on self-realisation in the workplace as the sign of emancipation, a rhetoric that unsettlingly individualises feminist politics and disregards structural obstacles to equality. Beech's works that focus on how discourses of female empowerment are being instrumentalised in contexts such as therapy and the corporate sphere, set out to untangle these issues in order to consider whether solidarity among women can be realised even within group settings that are co-opted by a capitalistic and neoliberal ethos, and whether feminist subjectivity can resist assimilation to an all-pervasive market ideology.

The three works show a development in the artist's thinking around the possibility of achieving a sense of community even within oppressive structures. If *Cannibals* displays a more critical attitude towards initiatives that instrumentalise a feminist rhetoric of empowerment to capitalise on women's struggle, *Me and Mine* shows how corporate feminist initiatives, albeit co-opted by a competitive, individualistic, entrepreneurial mentality, can still provide a common ground for women to gather and work through their different experiences of struggle with inclusion in a still male-dominated labour market. *Reproductive Exile* finally looks more hopefully at how practices of care can be mobilised to dismantle gender assumptions and overcome oppressive socio-biological conditions that have influenced the distribution of gender roles in both private and public life. The works never settle for an easy resolution, but skilfully maintain a tension that reveals the complexity of the struggle for inclusion and equal rights, marked by two opposing pulls: the desire to gain equal access and visibility in the social sphere, but also the desire to resist assimilation to the hegemonic logic that governs that very social space. The characters in Beech's work constantly battle with these two aspects, torn between the desire to be included and a wish to preserve their singularity.

Two recurrent motifs in the work suggest possible strategies of resistance. First, embodiment as an alternative to the disciplinary, regulatory models that threaten to curtail the parameters of action and interaction even within supposedly free, non-hierarchical spaces for solidarity and inclusion. Embodied proximity emerges as a force that temporarily suspends or disrupts systems of governmentality, particularly those that propose pre-packaged solutions, how-to guides, under the rubric of self-empowerment and emancipation, that eventually end up re-instating normative models of behaviour. Secondly, the unhappy consciousness of the feminist killjoy, embodied in the figure of the silent, sceptical, uncomfortable observer, who proposes

a counter narrative to that of progress, accumulation and positive affect which often conceals a hidden political agenda. Toxicity also emerges as an ally to the feminist killjoy's cause. Toxicity is embraced in an act of self-determination to counter the assimilative aspect of therapeutic narratives of improvement that enforce normativity under the false pretence of wellbeing and social inclusion. Dorothy, Vivian and Anna do not stive to earn the spectator's—nor their peers'—sympathy. They remain elusive, ungraspable, indigestible, revealing the possibility to preserve one's singularity and enact a form of criticism even within a system that constantly threatens to assimilate them.

Reflecting on Japonisme: Art, Gender and Race

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Abstract

This essay examines the intersection of the patriarchal construction of femininity and the Western construction of the Orient in the context of Japonisme. It addresses “space” as, on the one hand, the geographically and culturally demarcated Far East, particularly Japan, as opposed to the West and, on the other hand, the ideologically gendered spaces in which Euro-American women encountered Japanese art and culture.

In the latter half of the 19th century, Japanese art and artefacts gained immense popularity in the West to the extent that the term “Japonisme” was specially coined to describe Japan’s extensive influence on both popular culture and artistic production in France. Both Asian and Euro-American women participated in the culture of Japonisme by playing a variety of roles, from models of photographs in Japan to producers of artworks in France. However, their contribution has often eluded attention within studies of Japonisme. Focusing on the period from 1890 to 1910, this essay explores the West’s encounter with Japan as a cultural construct in the gendered spaces as defined by Western bourgeois ideology. Using a set of prints created by the American expatriate artist Mary Cassatt in 1891 as a case study, it attempts to show that the flourishing artistic creativity driven by Japonisme in France is underlain by an intersection of race and gender which shaped the dialogue between the two countries.

Analysing the relationship between Cassatt’s 1891 prints and Japonisme, this essay will first show that Western artists’ engagement with Japanese art depended on their positionality, an issue particularly important for women artists. While women had been historically restrained from pursuing a professional career as artist and subjected to gender stereotypes of their artistic expressions, they found a liberating tool in Japanese art. Its subject matters and techniques allowed women artists like Cassatt to develop innovative formal artistic language while also facilitated their negotiation with Western social and cultural conventions and to transgress gender roles. However, as this essay will then demonstrate by referencing the theoretical framework of

Orientalism, women artists' engagement with Japonisme was complicated by their racial power in relation to Asian people in addition to their gender position in Western societies. Conflating their native contexts with an imagined Japan, women artists often expanded the domestic sphere of femininity by reproducing Orientalist stereotypes in line with contemporary racial politics.

While many women who were involved in Japonisme, including Cassatt, never visited Japan, they nevertheless experienced it in domestic spaces in the West. An investigation of women artists' involvement in the Western visual and material culture centred on Japanese art will, therefore, reveal the various power relations and identity politics that shaped Japonisme and expand the disciplinary understanding of this phenomenon.

Following Japan's reopening to foreign trade in 1854, Japanese prints and a variety of artefacts flooded into Western countries and quickly became immensely popular among artists and the general public. By 1872, Japanese prints and decorative arts had achieved such considerable popularity to the extent that the French critic and collector Phillipe Burty coined the term "Japonisme" to refer to its extensive influence on both popular taste and artistic production.[44] As a field of critical inquiry, Japonisme has been extensively studied since the nineteenth century and received increasingly nuanced and interdisciplinary attention which had brought a wealth of visual materials and literary sources into light.[45] However, Japonisme has been mainly associated with white male artists and their activities in Europe and the United States while marginalising the participation of Western women.[46] The lack of critical attention to

[44] Gabriel P. Weisberg et al., *Japonisme: Japanese influence on French art, 1854-1910* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1975), 1.

[45] The ground-breaking exhibition at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 1975 recognised that Japonisme is a transcultural phenomenon that encompassed a wide range of media and developed different forms of representation over time. Siegfried Wichmann's book provides an indexical account of Japonisme that sheds light on individual Western artists' visual themes and techniques; Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme: The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981).

women's artistic activities not only produces an incomplete historiography of Japonisme but also perpetuates a male-defined fantasy based on Edward Said's influential yet by now contested model of Orientalism. Therefore, this essay attempts to show that Japonisme should not be considered from a Eurocentric or patriarchal perspective by attending to the intersection of two dimensions that have been relatively overlooked: gender and race.


1a


1b


1c


1d


1e


1f

[46] For example, see Colta Feller Ives, *The Great Wave: The Influence of Japanese Woodcuts on French Prints* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum, 1979). It surveys seven artists, all of whom are French men except for Mary Cassatt. More recent studies, however, seek beyond stylistic and thematic analogies to understand the Japonisme's position and role in the broader context of cultural politics, thereby drawing attention to Japonisme's implication for Western women. See Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Sarah Sik, "'Those Naught Little Geishas": The Gendering of Japonisme" in *The Orient Expressed: Japan's Influence on Western Art, 1854-1918* (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art; Seattle: in association with University of Washington Press, 2011).

1g

1h

1i

1J

All by Mary Cassatt, 1891. Color aquatint with drypoint from three plates, partially printed à la poupée, on ivory laid paper, varying dimensions. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

1a. *The Bath*
1b. *The Mother's Kiss*
1c. *Afternoon Tea Party*
1d. *Maternal Caress*
1e. *Woman Bathing*
1f. *The Letter*
1g. *The Fitting*
1h. *The Coiffure*
1i. *The Lamp*
1j. *In the Omnibus*

Structured by the two discourses, Western women artists occupied a complex position in the culture of Japonisme which bridged Japan to Western societies in both reality and imagination. In order to foreground women artists' agency, this essay focuses on the intersection of the patriarchal construction of femininity and the Western construction of the Orient from 1860 to 1910 by using a series of colour prints made by the American expatriate artist Mary Cassatt in 1891 in Paris (figures 1a-j) as a case study. While the development of Japonisme in Japan is an important aspect for understanding activities in France, Britain and the US, it is beyond the scope of this essay. Given Cassatt's transatlantic fame, it is surprising that this series, which manifests an explicit stylistic link to Japonisme, has always occupied a marginal position outside monographic studies of Cassatt and therefore has not been effectively considered in the context of Japonisme.[47] Connecting the scholarship of Japonisme

[47] This series has been considered as one of the quintessential Japonist works yet it is often only briefly mentioned in terms of Cassatt's style and techniques, especially when shown alongside the works of

to feminist readings of Cassatt in particular and women artists in general, the goal of this essay is threefold: to demonstrate that women actively participated in the culture of Japonisme; to discuss how the cultural construct of femininity was destabilised yet simultaneously reinforced by the discourse of race; and to emphasise that Japonisme was not only relevant to art but was also framed by its political and social context.

Japonisme in the West

Before investigating Cassatt's engagement with Japonisme, it is important to first acknowledge the role Japonisme played in Western art in general. Japanese prints, or *ukiyo-e*, were first introduced to Western societies at a time of crisis within Western artistic traditions. Frustrated by the restrictiveness of style and the jury system of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, avant-garde artists in France welcomed Japanese art as a refreshing alternative that spelled liberation on a social as well as artistic level.[48] Not only did these prints represent an exotic culture that was free from the "corrupted" Western influence, they also offered an antithesis to academic traditions which were considered to have stagnated French art.[49] Consequently, Japanese prints soon became more than fashionable commodities but also a rich source of artistic inspirations. Édouard Manet's *Portrait of Émile Zola* (figure 2), for example, shows a Japanese screen and a print in the background, which illustrate the contemporary fashion for collecting Japanese art and artefact, while also assimilating the Japanese principle of flattening the pictorial space against the grain of Western illusionistic naturalism.

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her male colleagues, see Philip Dennis Cate, "Japonisme and the Revival of Printmaking at the End of the Century," in *Japonisme in Art: An International Symposium* (Tokyo: Committee for the Year 2001, 1980). For monographic studies, see Nancy Mowll Matthews and Barbara Stern Shapiro, *Mary Cassatt: The Color Prints* (New York: H.N. Abrams; Williamstown: William College Museum of Art, 1989).

[48] Wichmann, *Japonisme* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), 10.

[49] Weisberg et al., *Japonisme,* 1-3, 115.

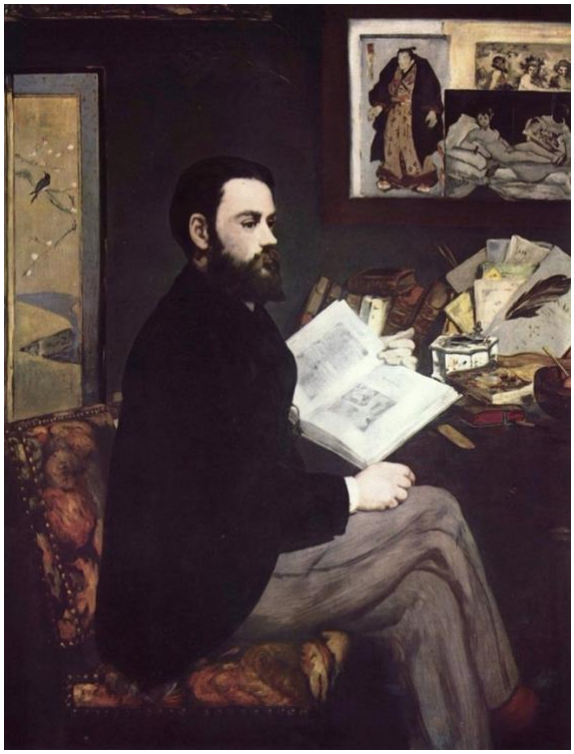

Figure 2. Edouard Manet, *Portrait of Emile Zola*, 1868. Oil on canvas, 146.5 × 114 cm. Paris: Musée d'Orsay.

Western artists reacted to Japanese art according to their varying aesthetic pursuits. As Michael Sullivan suggests, artistic transmissions like Japonisme "occur as a response to a conscious, and quite specific, need"[50], therefore, analysing the specific process through which a response is made would indicate what and how an artist aimed to address by referencing Japanese models. After Cassatt's faith in the Paris Salon failed, she accepted Edgar Degas's invitation to join the Impressionist Exhibition, which she relished as the chance to "work absolutely independently without worrying about the possible opinion of a jury"[51]. Although Cassatt adopted the Impressionistic style during that period, she also experimented with a variety of media and methods. A major exhibition of Japanese prints at the École des Beaux-Arts was a timely inspiration. Japanese prints' novelty and contrast to Western conventions

[50] Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Arts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), 256.

[51] Quoted in Achille Segard, *Mary Cassatt: Un Peintre des Enfants et des Mères* (Paris: Paul Ollenford, 1913), 7-8.

offered the perfect vehicle for Cassatt to reconcile her painterly style and colouristic method with her new-found interest in printmaking, which facilitated her development of an individual style that finally distinguished her artistic identity as an Independent artist.[52] Therefore, Cassatt's engagement with the culture of Japonisme in her 1891 series reflects the artist's active absorption and adaptation of ukiyo-e aesthetics into her pre-established artistic language.

Determined to practice art professionally, Cassatt was not only drawn to Japonisme for its artistic possibilities but also engaged with it as a business venture. While Cassatt was working on the prints, her mother wrote to her brother, "Mary is at work again, intent on fame & money she says".[53] By the 1890s, Japonisme was not only seen in pictorial arts but has permeated into literature and every aspect of material culture to the extent of becoming embedded in everyday life.[54] The omnipresence of Japanese-related commodities and works attests to the immense popularity of Japonisme as a part of Western visual culture, which guaranteed Cassatt publicity. Although Cassatt did not have the financial need to earn by her art, she would not have missed the chance to display her artistic versatility by participating in such a culture, which is evidenced by her insistence to showcase her colour prints at an independent exhibition held with Camille Pissarro that directly rivalled the 1891 exhibition of the Société des Peintres-Graveurs from which they were excluded because of nationality.

Moreover, Cassatt had more at stake than her colleagues because of her gender. As Linda Nochlin's seminal essay published in 1971 demonstrates, women were institutionally barred from training in art and systematically discouraged from pursuing a professional career.[55] Studying Cassatt's career, Michel Melot observes that Cassatt was slighted for her nationality upon arrival in the French art world, which

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[52] For different phases of Cassatt's art and career, see Nancy Mowll Matthews, *Cassatt and her Circle: Selected Letters* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 205.

[53] Katherine Cassatt to Alexander Cassatt, July 23, 1891, cited in ibid., 222.

[54] See Lionel Lambourne, *Japonisme: Cultural Crossings between Japan and the West* (London: Phaidon Press, 2005), 130.

[55] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" reprinted in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (1988; New York: Routledge, 2018), 158.

was only exacerbated when she adopted printmaking, a medium that particularly contradicted social expectations of middle- to upper-middle-class women.[56] In this context, it was imperative for Cassatt to prove to the prejudiced public her capability as a well-trained artist, despite being an American and a woman, in order to fulfil her professional ambition.

It is therefore not a coincidence that Cassatt chose printmaking techniques to experiment with ukiyo-e aesthetics. Historically, the academy valued the originality of art; printmaking was considered a "low" art because of its reproductive function. The Paris Salon announced that "no work in color will be admitted" in the print section as late as 1891 because colour prints were particularly associated with mass production[57]. Rebelling against every tenet of academicism, avant-garde artists started a rage for exploring the artistic possibilities of printmaking to produce unique works of art[58]. Moreover, the recent revival of colour printmaking techniques in France defied the association of colours with vulgar taste and conversely promoted production of colour prints,[59] which heightened the French audience's receptivity of Japanese colour prints. The French writers Jules and Edmond de Goncourt portrayed the colourful ukiyo-e prints as the embodiment of "a world of heightened sensory pleasure where color, taste, and feeling all surpassed what was to be had in a cold and colorless Paris".[60] This changing cultural perception of original colour prints created a favourable environment for Western artists like Cassatt to reconceptualise her art by referencing Japanese prints.

Gendering Japonisme

Japonisme indicates a moment of cultural encounter when Western artists actively mediated between their native artistic traditions and the resources offered by

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[56] Michel Melot, "Mary Cassatt, An Artist between Two World," in *Mary Cassatt Impressions* (Giverny: Musée d'Art Américain and the Terra Foundation for American Art, 2005), 84-6.

[57] Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 73.

[58] Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho, *Printmaking in Paris: The Rage for Prints at the Fin-de-Siècle* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 11-5.

[59] Michel Melot, *The Impressionist Print* (New Haven: Yale University Press,), 231-2.

[60] Cited in Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 42.

Japanese art. However, as Mieke Bal and Norman Bryce suggest, the reception and application of a new artistic language involves "an insertion into pre-established systems of visual discourse that lay down in advance the paths or networks that the speaker's words are obliged to follow".[61] By responding to the stimuli of Japanese prints, Western artists not only participated in the anxiety about reforming their art but simultaneously engaged with their own cultural traditions and social values. Consequently, Japonisme was steeped in Western gender politics which some contested whereas others conformed.

According to Said's concept of Orientalism, Europeans and Americans invented an Oriental "Other" as opposed to the Occidental "Self" in order to establish their authority and superiority over the Orient. This political and military power relation is projected onto Western gender discourse, which is reflected by the example of "Flaubert's position of strength in relation to Kuchuk Hanem", an Egyptian courtesan.[62] The Orientalist discourse also subjugated Japan to the West based on the Western notion of hierarchical masculinity and femininity and structured the culture of Japonisme by constructing a perception of Japanese art as a feminine language. Like the protagonist of the Goncourt brothers' novel *Manette Salomon* (1867) who saw in Japanese prints "women, some wound round with cherry-colored silk, others covered by fans; women drinking with tiny sips from red lacquer cups; women in boats gliding on rivers, nonchalantly bent over the poetic and fugitive water"[63], Western writers and artists perceived Japanese prints as the product of a "feminine" culture that epitomises a mythicised femininity. In a cartoon drawn by the Scottish artist George Henry of his colleague E.A. Hornel, with whom he had travelled to Japan in 1893-4, Hornel's portrait is flanked by some pseudo *kanji* characters on the left and a geisha's head and some decorative patterns on the right.[64] However, while Hornel's portrait is a relatively realistic one with modelling to emphasize volume, the geisha's stylised head

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[61] Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73, no.2 (June 1991): 199.

[62] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 1-6; for critique of the Saidian model's insufficient treatment of gender, see Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996), 15-22.

[63] Quoted in Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 42.

[64] See *The Bailie Cartoon Supplement*, 1st May, 1895. Page 1.

is not only much smaller but depicted in a cursory and abstract manner to echo well-known iconographies. The relation between a dominant Western male and a passive Japanese woman who is reduced to an icon is at once established and projects the West's fantasied cultural relation vis-à-vis Japan.

Highly gendered and racialised, Japonisme derived from Western men's fantasy about an exotic and sensuous culture on which prevalent notions of the patriarchal society could be mapped. As Christopher Reed demonstrates, the first audience of Japanese art and artefact was an exclusive circle of men, including connoisseurs, writers and artists.[65] Citing the opera *Madame Butterfly*, which ends with a Western woman's intrusion into and destruction of the relationship between a Western man and his Japanese muse, Reed argues that Japanese prints offered men a temporary escape from the bourgeois society and the established proprieties it entailed. The world of ukiyo-e as described by the Goncourt brothers as a world of sensuality offered them "an alternative ecosystem" where they could indulge in fantasies of the ideal woman that transgresses the goddess/prostitute paradigm with which real-life women in the West were compelled to comply.[66] Japonisme thus originated in the context where men who were alienated from Western social norms sought refuge in the art of the Orient, where insufficient knowledge of local culture allowed them to conjure up a romanticised vision to satisfy their own anticipation of modern life. In this process, Japanese art, including its motifs and design principles, were associated with and designated for representing a femininity that was mythicised by the romantic imagination of the West and codified by the patriarchal society.

In this context, Japanese objects in Western artworks not only point to the rapidly expanding market for Japanese goods in the West but often function as signifiers of sensuality and femininity. In Jules Lefebvre's *Une Japonaise* (figure 3), a Caucasian woman is clad in an exquisite kimono and daintily holds a fan to her lips while poses and gazes at the viewer invitingly.[67] While the overt sexual tension would have casted the white model into the role of prostitute, it is legitimised when she is

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[65] Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 45-7.

[66] Ibid., 49-50, 64.

[67] Sik, "'Those Naughty Little Geishas'", 117-8.

transformed by iconic Japanese ornaments into a “Japanese” model who was considered the embodiment of different cultural and moral values which were assumed to be inferior to Western ones. Avant-garde artists, too, perpetuated gendered notions in the process of assimilating the design principles of ukiyo-e. Degas, for example, showed clear evidence of studying Torii Kiyonaga’s depictions of the private moments of women bathing in works such as *The Bath* (figure 4). Exploring possibilities of the form, Degas claimed to capture women “without their coquetry, in the state of animals cleansing themselves” by depicting the woman’s body bent in an awkward pose.[68] The result echoes Kiyonaga’s representation of the bather’s spontaneous movement yet also appears deformed by the heavy ink of the monotype. While some scholars have challenged Degas’s alleged misogyny indicated by such artistic practice by highlighting his Realist project, Degas’s depictions of women nevertheless betray a naturalised male perspective that objectified and marginalised women.[69] The Third Republic considered women, regardless of class, as a threat to social and moral order.[70] By observing women’s bodies as materials for his formal experimentation, Degas perpetuated a century-long artistic tradition that positions women as the object of the male subject’s vision (figure 5). Women are the observed while men are the observer. Incorporating the oblique angle and flat space of Japanese prints as a formal means to depict the model as an object or at least a lesser human of animalistic nature, Degas’s representation echoes the social construction of women as the Other in a society rightfully dominated by men.

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[68] Cited in Yoko Kawaguchi, *Butterfly’s Sisters: The Geisha in Western Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 83.

[69] For example, see Norma Broude, “Degas’s ‘Misogyny’,” *The Art Bulletin* 59, no.1 (March 1977): 105.

[70] Ann Ilan-Alter, “Paris as Mecca of Pleasure: Women in Fin-de-Siècle Paris,” in *The Graphic Arts and French Society, 1871-1914*, ed. Phillip Cate (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 74.

Figure 3. Jules-Joseph Lefebvre, *Une Japonaise*, 1882. Oil on canvas, 130.8 × 90.2 cm. Virginia: Chrysler Museum of Art.

Figure 4. Edgar Degas, *The Bath*, c.1882. Monotype in black ink on cream laid paper, 31.4 × 27.8 cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

It is important to bear in mind that Western women were as much involved in the culture of Japonisme as men. Griselda Pollock points out, “as the ideology of domesticity became hegemonic, it regulated women’s and men’s behaviour in the

respective public and private spaces."[71] Occupying different physical and mental positions within the society, women formed connections with Japonisme in different ways than men but also had a gendered perspective on Japanese art. In her study of women Orientalist artists, Mary Kelly suggests that Western women's visions of Oriental subjects are framed by a "female gaze" which is informed by women's distinct experience from men in their native societies as well as in foreign ones.[72] Women's participation in structuring the discourse of Japonisme has been eclipsed by the activities of their male counterpart; however, it should be considered an essential part in the historiography of Japonisme.

Figure 5. Albrecht Dürer, *Draughtsman Making a Perspective Drawing of a Reclining Woman*, c.1600. Woodcut, 7.7 × 21.4 cm. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Cassatt's 1891 series offers a prominent example of the female gaze on Japanese art. In contrast to Lefebvre's use of Japanese objects and motifs to simultaneously visualise Western fantasies of women and of Japan, Cassatt avoided any direct quotation of meaning-laden Japanese *objets d'art* in the series. While the striped dress in *Woman Bathing* or the tea set in *Afternoon Tea Party* are reminiscent of commodified Japanese objects, they are integrated into the material spaces and become a natural part of the depicted women's lives. Instead of showing such objects as decorative, exotic novelties, Cassatt's representation draws attention to women's role as consumers and collectors in expanding the culture of Japonisme by introducing

[71] Griselda Pollock, :Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and the Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 98.

[72] Mary Kelly, *French Women Orientalist Artists, 1861-1956: Cross-Cultural Contacts and Depictions of Difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 2021), 21.

Japanese art and artefacts into French homes and daily life, which highlights their autonomy in the field of interior décor.[73] Excluded from men's artistic fantasies, Western women nonetheless participated in Japonisme according to their own position and inscribed Japanese art and artefacts with differently gendered cultural significance.

Moreover, Cassatt adapted the same formal devices as Degas in her 1891 prints as a way to resist the objectification of female figures. In contrast to Degas's generalisation of the working-class model into a faceless type whose sole purpose appears to be to display her body to the male gaze, which results in a voyeuristic effect, Cassatt's prints emphasise the model's individuality. In *The Lamp*, Cassatt also depicted the woman from an oblique angle that exposes a large area of her neck, which is particularly evocative of an erotic overtone in association with the geisha. However, the flattened space pushes the figure towards the pictorial plane where the woman is positioned in almost oppressive proximity to the viewer. The firm outline of the woman's profile and facial features assert her individuality. Cassatt's depiction, therefore, rejects the viewer's voyeuristic probe and alternatively highlights the immediacy of the scene and the woman's dominance in her space. Cassatt's prints demonstrate that gender positions significantly impacted the cultural perception of and artistic response to Japanese art. Embedded in the patriarchal society, Japonisme is itself a highly gendered and gendering arena in which gendered meanings are further inscribed from varying perspectives.

Japanese prints and Western subjects and techniques

Assimilating the influence of Japanese prints in keeping with Western printmaking revival, Cassatt developed a new vocabulary that strengthened her calibre as an artist. While five prints from the 1891 series adopted these familiar themes, the other half represent women engaged in completely new activities such as taking public transport, which is only featured this once in Cassatt's entire oeuvre.[74] In the four prints depicting the maternity scene for which Cassatt was well-known before 1891, Cassatt also flouted the bourgeois gender ideology by countering stereotypes in both Western

[73] Mari Yoshihara, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 49-50.

[74] Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 43.

and Japanese traditions that assumed a natural link between motherhood and womanhood.[75] For example, by sharply juxtaposing the aloof biological mother with the attentive paid servant who assumes the maternal role, *In the Omnibus* reveals that Motherhood is a socially constructed notion dependent on economic relation rather than the natural role of women.[76] Class difference between the two women stands out in sharp relief, indicating that femininity was not the monolithic and homogeneous category that the prevalent ideology had suggested. Moreover, while *The Bath* compositionally draws upon Utamaro's *Bath Time* (figure 6), it is firmly situated in a series of Cassatt's works that engaged with the topical issue of hygiene.[77] Created as the first of the 1891 series, *The Bath* best illustrates Cassatt's intention to adapt the vocabulary of Japanese models to articulate new ideas in the West so as to produce images that are thematically as well as aesthetically grounded in contemporary life.

Inspired by ukiyo-e iconographies, Cassatt began exploring and representing a wider range of contemporary women's lives in the 1891 prints. Instead of confining herself to Impressionist themes, Cassatt invented an individual expression that is underlain by her observation of women from the perspective of a woman artist. Her vision reveals the constructedness of the mythical femininity that consigned women to the private sphere.

Concomitant with the translation of Japanese iconographies was Cassatt's interpretation of the Japanese method of printmaking. Melot downplayed the influence of Japanese methods on Cassatt;[78] however, the large number of preliminary states

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[75] For Western stereotype of woman's reproductive sexuality, see Harriet Scott Chessman, "Mary Cassatt and the Maternal Body," in *American Iconology: New Approaches to Nineteenth-Century Art and Literature*, ed. David C. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 240; for Japanese stereotypes see Julie Nelson Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 172-3.

[76] Griselda Pollock, *Mary Cassatt: Painter of Modern Woman* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 171-2.

[77] Judith Barter, ed. *Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman* (New York: Art Institute of Chicago in association with H.N. Abrams, 1998), 69-71.

[78] Melot, *The Impressionist Print*, 226.

that the artist went through to imitate the effect of Japanese woodcuts with a variety of Western techniques makes his argument less convincing.[79] As a quintessential painter-printmaker, Cassatt retained her painterly style even as she began practicing the inherently linear graphic media and continued using etching and aquatint instead of woodblocks as in line with the Japanese method. Using up to three copper plates to superimpose colours, Cassatt adopted the Japanese three-part palette, which characterised the prints available at the 1890 exhibition,[80] while translating Japanese woodcuts into the idiom of Western printmaking.

Figure 6. Kitagawa Utamaro, *Bath Time*, 1801. Woodblock print; ink and color on paper, 37.3 × 25.1 cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Figure 7. Mary Cassatt. *In the Opera Box, No.3,* 1880. Soft ground etching and aquatint on cream laid paper, 19.5 × 17.5 cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

Integrating techniques from both cultures, the 1891 series represents Cassatt's shift away from Impressionism to a linear and abstract style that emphasises decorativeness and pictorial clarity. As the result of her Japanese-inspired methods,

[79] For the preliminary states, see Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 106-9.

[80] Deborah Johnson, "Cassatt's Color Prints of 1891: The Unique Evolution of a Palette," *Notes in the History of Art* 9, no.3 (1990): 36; for Cassatt's plates, see Matthews, *Cassatt and her Circle*, 217.

Cassatt prioritised the creation of elaborate arabesques and the juxtaposition of unmodulated colours, which flattened the form and created a "deliberately undefined spatial setting" where figures as well as decorative patterns are candidly shown on a two-dimensional surface.[81] Abandoning illusionistic naturalism, Cassatt on the one hand embraced the decorative function of artworks in keeping with the contemporary artistic tendency propagated by the printmaking revival, and on the other subverted her earlier Impressionistic style in the 1880s.

During her collaboration with Degas and Pissarro on a publication initiative, Cassatt subscribed to the Impressionist goal of capturing the transience of the moment by depicting the effect of light on objects.[82] In *In the Opera Box, No.3* (figure 7), Cassatt almost obliterated the form of the woman in order to suggest the intensely lit environment. Relieved against the background, the woman's voided-out body becomes the venue for the artist to lay down "variegated zones and spots of light" that emphasises a subtle interplay between light and form.[83] Like the distant audience that dissolves into darkness, the woman is displaced by light as the subject. In contrast to the rich tonal effect that dramatises the early 1880s prints, Cassatt's later prints display a distinctively line-based art that signifies her changing attitude towards printmaking.

The most important stylistic change in the 1891 series is therefore the distinct clarity of the form which echoes the linearity of ukiyo-e prints. While figures are juxtaposed with surrounding objects, they do not dominate nor dissolve into their spatial setting. The figures are subtly yet clearly demarcated by Cassatt's skilfully drawn contours so they each appear as a concrete presence and an independent individual in their material environment. Nevertheless, unlike ukiyo-e prints, none of the figures in the 1891 series have any part of their bodies radically cropped off the composition, which is a device commonly deployed by ukiyo-e artists to suggest

[81] Marc Rosen and Susan Pinsky, "The Museum as Muse: Innovations and Intersections in Printmaking," in *Degas Cassatt*, ed. Kimberly Jones (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 106.

[82] Amanda T. Zehnder, "Forty Years of Artistic Exchange," in *Degas Cassatt*, 6-9.

[83] Hollis Clayson, *Illuminated Paris: Essays on Art and Lighting in the Belle Époque* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 117.

immediacy of the moment.[84] Cassatt's depiction of female figures with such dignity, integrity and individuality by placing each figure firmly within a completely constructed pictorial space marks a drastic departure from her earlier prints. It suggests that the artist critically adapted the linear style of Japanese prints to reform her Impressionistic language in order to shift her focus away from the artificial modernity to the social reality to which women were subjected. By making this stylistic adjustment, Cassatt equipped herself with the formal means to dignify women's presence in modern society.

Japonisme for women artists

Since Nochlin posed her classic question, it has become a well-rehearsed argument that women artists had been denied equal access to the artistic profession as their male colleagues. The academic hierarchy of subjects which positioned history painting at the top effectively put prestige and recognition out of women artists' reach because the very skills necessary to depict the nudes that populate history paintings depended on life drawing classes which were theoretically inaccessible to "lady painters" until the end of the nineteenth century.[85] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock argue that women have been excluded from "both the tools and the power to give meanings of their own to themselves and their culture"[86]. Morisot was praised because the nineteenth-century audience considered her Impressionist style an expression of her "natural' femininity"[87]. Defining the prestigious style and subject, the male-dominated art world prevented most women artists from competing on an equal footing with men by subjecting them to an essentially patriarchal system. This situation, however, altered when Japonisme on the one hand challenged Western artistic

[84] See Drew Stevens, "Working at the Edge: Japanese Elision and Western Printmakers," in *Awash in Color: French and Japanese Prints*, eds. Chelsea Foxwell and Anne Leonard (Chicago: Smart Museum of Chicago, 2012), 111-21.

[85] Nochlin, "Great Women Artists", 159.

[86] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 131.

[87] See Tamar Garb, *Sisters of the Brush: Women's Artistic Culture in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 122.

traditions that constricted women and on the other destabilised gender relations by bringing the issue of race to the forefront.

As this essay has attempted to demonstrate, Japonisme was not only concerned with art but was underlain by a complex structure of cultural and social ideals of gender. In addition, it was also grounded in Western imperialist agenda. While Japan was never formally colonised, its relationships with Western nations were initiated by Western military intervention. In 1854, Japan was forced to open its border to foreign trade after more than two centuries of self-isolation because the American Commodore Matthew Perry threatened to attack, followed by similar threats and actual acts of force by countries including France and Britain.[88] At the origin of Japonisme were unequal military relations and imposed commercial contracts that subjected Japan to Western powers. Western men took a straightforwardly dominant position in this imperial relation whereas women occupied a more delicate position. Racially, they were privileged by the unequal East-West relation yet remained inferior in the male-female gender paradigm. The Orientalist traveller Mary Gaunt states, "In England, if I came across a crowd of shouting, furious, angry men, I should certainly pass by on the other side, but here in Africa … I *fully expected* village elders to bow to my decision, and I am bound to say they generally did"[89]. Gaunt's expression of a common Orientalist attitude also sheds light on the situation of Japonisme.

Race became an important differential that empowered the Western women. As Reina Lewis argues, mediation between such positions was crucial for "the very construction of professional creative opportunities for European women" because it enabled them to assume the transgressive role of cultural producer. [90] Commenting

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[88] See Hugh Cortazzi, "The British in Japan in the Nineteenth Century," in *Japan and Britain: An Aesthetic Dialogue 1850-1930,* eds., Tomoko Sato and Toshio Watanabe (London: Lund Humphries in association with the Barbican Art Gallery and Setagaya Art Museum, 1991), 55-7; Tomoko Sato and Toshio Watanabe, "The Aesthetic Dialogue Examined: Japan and Britain 1850-1930," in *Japan and Britain,* 14-7.

[89] Cited in Evelyn Bach, "A Traveller in Skirts: Quest and Conquest in the Travel Narratives of Isabella Bird," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 22, nos. 3-4 (1995): 593. My italics.

[90] Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism*, 3.

on the English traveller Isabella Bird's travel to Japan, Cicely Haveley notes, "no one seems to have thought it odd that Mr. Green should take Miss Bird camping on the edge of a volcano, or that she should stay unchaperoned in the residence of Mr. Low, or accompany Captain Walker on a shooting expedition to a lotus lake"[91]. Bird published her travel narratives in 1880, with the intention to "contribute something to the sum of knowledge of the present condition of the country" as "the first European lady" who had travelled through "the interior of the main island [of Japan] and in Yezo"[92]. As travel to Japan liberated Bird from English codes of feminine conducts and enabled her to assume an authoritative voice, Japonisme analogously enabled women artists to explore practices that would have been considered inappropriate by Western norms; it liberated them to examine and shape the newly carved artistic territory that had yet been chartered by Western traditions.

Cassatt's 1891 series shows a successful marriage of Japanese aesthetics and techniques with Western subjects, which reveals her project to redefine femininity by creating a new system of artistic language rather than perpetuating male-defined practices and conventions. Significantly, Cassatt was cautious to adapt the style of Japanese prints instead of appropriating their subject matters in order to avoid evoking established stereotypes of women.[93] Unlike Bertha Lum's prints such as *Aoyagi* (figure 8), which portrays a Japanese woman in her kimono against a green willow, Cassatt's 1891 prints explicitly depict Western women, whose cultural identity is accentuated by their costume, hairdo and surrounding.[94] Although Lum consciously avoided eroticisation of the figure, she emphasised the sensuous curves of the willow that echo the body of the woman who demurely looks down. This subsumption of the figure into the print's decorative pattern suggests that Lum unconsciously subscribed to the masculinist vision of Japanese art in the West, which ultimately resulted in categorising women as an object of the male gaze.[95] On the contrary, Cassatt, by subtly adapting the linear style of ukiyo-e prints to her Impressionist learning, produced a group of

[91] Cited in Bach, "A Traveller in Skirts", 590.

[92] Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1880), vii-viii.

[93] Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 52.

[94] Sik, "'Those Naught Little Geishas'", 109-11.

[95] Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 57-62.

images that is at once exotic enough to be excused of its signs of social improprieties and familiar enough to elicit contemporary audience's resonance.

This success is illustrated nowhere better than in *The Coiffure*, which is the only finished work in Cassatt's oeuvre that depicts frontal nudity of a grown woman. The theme of a woman attending to her toilette in front of a mirror is popular in Japanese art; for Cassatt, it not only explains the nudity and hence makes the scene appears natural and spontaneous, but also makes a direct reference to Japanese conventions that effectively absolves a Western woman artist's portrayal of nudity from impropriety.[96] A comparison of this print with Cassatt's preliminary study shows her deliberate stylisation of the breasts to neutralise the nude body; the formal vigour strips the historically imposed erotic overtone of female sexual organs. As Anne Higonnet summarises, the adaptation of Japanese aesthetics allowed women artists to represent the female body "on their own terms"[97]. By showing female nude in a non-eroticised light and a condition of self-immersion, Cassatt resisted the patriarchal and art-historical objectification of women in art and challenged the bourgeois society's regulation of female sexuality.

[96] Richard Kendall, "Women Artists and Impressionism," in *Women Artists in Paris, 1850-1900*, ed. Laurence Madeline (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 48.

[97] Anne Higonnet, *Berthe Morisot's Images of Women* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 191.

Figure 8. Bertha Lum, *Aoyagi*, 1908. Colour Woodcut, 27.6 × 12.1 cm. Minnesota: Minneapolis Institute of

While Cassatt relied on the prevalent cultural perception of Japanese art as exotic and sensual to mask the transgression of femininity as defined by the patriarchal society, she also consciously adapted Japanese aesthetics to render female subjectivity instead of reproducing male fantasies. Therefore, the 1891 series challenged both artistic conventions of the female nude and Western stereotypes of women artists and their capabilities. Operating within the racialised as well as gendered field of Japonisme, women artists turned the complexity and tension of such relations to their advantage and asserted their role as cultural producers who actively inscribed a layer of meaning on the discourse of Japonisme. They invented their own "tool" to facilitate alternative forms of expression. Undeniably, women artists only represent a small portion in artistic Japonisme, yet any understanding of this phenomenon will be incomplete without addressing their production, which reconceptualised social modernity as well as artistic modernism.

Japonisme and gendered modernity

Since Baudelaire's call for using a modern style to represent modern time, Western artists had been concerned with capturing modernity throughout the second half of the nineteenth century.[98] In the cultural context of reforming artistic expressions, Japonisme offered women not only the technical means but also a license to unveil an alternative view of femininity embedded in modern life. A significant characteristic of Cassatt's 1891 series is the serial framework that explores a wide range of women's activities. With "its occasional repetition of model and suggestion of times of day", Cassatt's clear intention to "achieve a Western version of [Japanese art's] survey" of women's daily cycles parallels Utamaro's masterpiece, *Twelve Hours in Yoshiwara*.[99] This series consists of twelve colour prints, each depicting a scene of courtesans in the Yoshiwara pleasure quarter at a specific time of the day according to the Japanese time system. In light of her contemporaries Monet's series of landscape paintings and Degas's suites of bathers or dancers, Cassatt's interest in using the serial format to explore a subject of her interest is not unusual.

Jack Hillier suggests that the *Twelve Hours* series follows the ukiyo-e school's tradition of celebrating details of the "everyday" world'[100]. In *The Hour of the Horse* (figure 9) for example, three fashionably dressed women are engaged in a casual interaction with each other; the lower-rank prostitute on the right steals a glance into the mirror while the courtesan turns away to read a letter shown by her maid on the left. Paralleling Utamaro's revelation of courtesan's intimate life, Cassatt portrayed the typical daily routine of contemporary middle-class Parisian women by highlighting details of the material culture. Whether it is the plain garment in *The Coiffure*, the formal outdoor attire in *In the Omnibus*, or the elegant dress in *The Lamp*, women throughout the 1891 series invariably wear contemporary clothes according to the occasion the print addresses. Moreover, the decorative textiles in the background not only function as an aesthetic device but also reflect the Arts and Crafts Movement that shaped the Parisian fashion for indoor décor at the fin-de-siècle.[101] Depicting features

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[98] See Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne (Phaidon Press, 1964), 12-5.

[99] Matthews and Shapiro, *The Color Prints*, 42, 65-8.

[100] Jack Hillier, *Utamaro: Colour Prints and Paintings* (London: Phaidon, 1961), 92.

[101] Kruckenberg, "The Making and Marketing of the Belle Epreuve", 197-8.

that are specific to contemporary fashion favoured by the urban bourgeoisie, Cassatt situated her subject matters' activities in the historical and cultural milieu of fin-de-siècle France; the 1891 prints collectively create an effect of unfolding the rituals of a middle-class woman's daily life in the metropolitan environment of Paris.

However, while there is an analogy between the framework of the 1891 series and Utamaro's cycle, they are created from divergent perspectives. Julie Nelson Davis demonstrates that Utamaro's cycle is not the objective observation of women as it is fashioned to appear.[102] The sensuous curve in *The Hour of the Snake* is designed to "reveal appreciated parts of the female body"; viewing *The Hour of the Rooster* (figure 10), any Edo audience would be privy to the fact that the elaborately dressed courtesan is on her way to a rendezvous with a client accompanied by her maid[103]. Utamaro only depicted women in this cycle, yet there is always a suggested male presence in the pictorial narrative. Consequently, Utamaro's *Twelve Hours* is not a revelation of the life within the pleasure quarter; it serves the particular interest of a male audience and conforms to the masculinist perspective of the Edo society that viewed women through an objectifying and eroticising lens.

[102] Davis, *Utamaro and the Spectacle of Beauty*, 125, 153-6, 182.

[103] Ibid., 132-40.

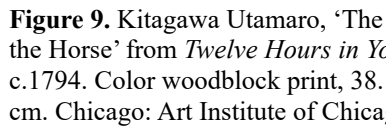

Figure 9. Kitagawa Utamaro, 'The Hour of the Horse' from *Twelve Hours in Yoshiwara,* c.1794. Color woodblock print, 38.1 × 25.4 cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

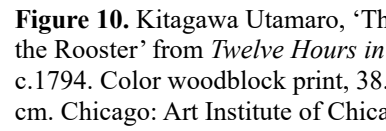

Figure 10. Kitagawa Utamaro, 'The Hour of the Rooster' from *Twelve Hours in Yoshiwara,* c.1794. Color woodblock print, 38.1 × 25.4 cm. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago.

In contrast, Cassatt represented women with a familiarity of their experience in the city. As Sally Webster notes, Cassatt refused to dress the modern woman with extravagant costumes and insisted on expressing them in "flattering, dignified styles that allowed them freedom of movement to emblematically carry out the tasks of independent womanhood"[104]. In the 1891 series, Cassatt not only showed the modernity of her subject matters by the contemporaneity of their costumes and settings, but also by emphasising the autonomy they symbolically gained in the modern city. Contrary to Utamaro's well-adorned courtesans who perform an imaginary sexuality for the enjoyment of the male gaze, Cassatt's women are free to move around in a variety of urban spaces from the most intimate boudoir to the omnibus that traverses the city. Comparing the final state of *In the Omnibus* with a preliminary drawing, Barter underlines Cassatt's deletion of a male figure that sits closely to the women and contends that it signifies the artist's total exclusion of men from the entire series, which indicates her intention to "represent the hours of a *woman's* day" via a series of prints.[105]

Moreover, Cassatt not only depicted performed activities within the domestic sphere, but also expressed the psychological positionality experienced by women in what Pollock termed the "spaces of femininity"[106]. A comparison between William Merritt Chase's *A Friendly Call* (figure 11) with Cassatt's *Afternoon Tea Party* highlights the significance of the gendered perspective. Whereas Chase painted two immobile women who are formally integrated into the luxurious ornamentation of the room from a distance, Cassatt showed two warmly conversing women in command of their space. The viewer's proximity to the dominant figures registers a "historically and psychologically *feminine* [space]" from which the work is made, which was only

[104] Sally Webster, *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 81-4.
[105] Barter, *Modern Woman*, 84. My italics.

[106] Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity", 80-1.

possible for a woman artist who shared the social position of her subjects[107]. As a woman artist, Cassatt was able to dignify each activity by conveying its nuanced psychological effect on women and to portray modern women immersed in familiar daily activities with which her middle-class female audience could identify.

Figure 11. William Merritt Chase, *A Friendly Call*, 1895. Oil on canvas, 76.5 × 122.5 cm. Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art.

Revealing women's navigation, both physically and psychologically, in the bourgeois society, the 1891 series highlights a crucial issue of women's visibility that has been contested by feminist scholars. Nine prints from the series depict the private sphere which was particularly associated with femininity according to the bourgeois ideology. The only exception, *In the Omnibus*, has been interpreted as evidence of bourgeois women's participation in the public sphere,[108] yet its disregard for the social

[107] Pollock, *Painter of Modern Woman*, 122-6.

[108] Temma Balducci, "Aller à Pied: Bourgeois Women on the Streets of Paris," in *Women, Femininity and Public Space in European Visual Culture, 1789-1914*, eds. Temma Balducci and Heather Belnap Jensen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 159-61.

reality of women inevitably sharing public transport with men led Nochlin to describe the pictorial space as a "traveling parlour" where women are "protected" in an "encapsulated world"[109]. Figures throughout the 1891 series are positioned in the spaces of femininity, which reflects the real-life experience of middle-class women, including Cassatt herself. As many discussions of the divided spheres show, women were not so much physically confined to the home than psychically conditioned to stay within the ideologically constructed spaces of femininity in order to maintain their respectability which the patriarchal society demanded of them. The writer Octave Uzanne advised Parisian bourgeoises to refrain from walking in the streets because half of the women there were "clandestine prostitutes"[110]. His "advice" suggests that although women possessed physical mobility, they would be invariably subjected to the male gaze as sexual objects when they ventured outdoors. It is the psychological pressure that women consciously felt in the public sphere that effectively buttressed the ideology of gendered spheres. As Pollock argues, the socially constructed discourse prevented middle-class women from engaging with "the very activities and experiences we typically accept as defining modernity", such as shown by Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*[111]. Consequently, women artists' depictions of the spaces of femininity are excluded from the canon of modernity, which was defined on men's terms and erased women's presence from Parisian modern life.

In this context, it is paramount to reposition women artists in historiography by examining their works' relation to the discourse of modernity. Referencing the novelist Dorothy Richardson, Nochlin identifies "women's art of organising domestic ceremonies" as "the creation of atmosphere"; while "not one man in a million is aware of it…it is like air within the air", subtle yet essential for Parisian modernity[112]. Cassatt's 1891 series is exclusively devoted to this "art." Explaining her printmaking method, Cassatt indicated that she abandoned her intention of imitating the Japanese method

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[109] Linda Nochlin, *Representing Women* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 205.

[110] Cited in John House, "Women Out of Doors," in *Women in Impressionism: From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman*, ed. Sidsel Maria Søndergaard (Milan: Skira, 2006), 173.

[111] Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity", 98.

[112] Nochlin, *Representing Women*, 181-3.

after creating *The Bath* and instead "tried for more atmosphere"[113], which resulted in the intricately decorated pictorial space in the rest of the series. It can be suggested that Cassatt's "atmosphere" parallels Richardson's celebration of the crucial role that women's domestic rituals played for constituting modernity which was experienced yet simultaneously neglected by men. As Janet Wolff demonstrates, modernity itself is a discursive construct and the separated spheres a "narrative device" deployed by men to exclude women from the modern city. Cassatt, by alternatively privileging the female perspective, opens up "the possibility of seeing women's complex negotiations of city life, real obstacles and constraints, and ideological constructions which attempt to fix and constrain them".[114] The 1891 series, therefore, reveals the female side of modernity located in the "private" sphere and elevates the feminine rituals as a significant and integral part of modern life. It points to the necessity of historiographical reconceptualisation of fin-de-siècle social modernity.

Encountering/Imagining Japan

The convergence of artistic modernism with social modernity in Cassatt's 1891 series cannot be dissociated from Japonisme. Officially aligning herself with the suffragist movement in 1915, Cassatt had engaged with the culture of Japonisme as a means to develop her art to ultimately address the situation of her female contemporaries. Her fundamental feminist sympathy might explain why she explicitly referenced the style of Japanese prints yet insisted on representing distinctly Western subjects instead of depicting Japanese women in their native country as many others did. The latter category sharply points to the circumstances under which Japonisme was formed in the West and which obscured its racialised political structure as well as gendered terms. To quote Said's discussion of Orientalism, Japonisme should also be understood as "a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture"; it projected Western notions of gender and race onto Japanese subjects along the lines

[113] Letter from Mary Cassatt to Frank Weitenkampf, 18 May 1906. New York Public Library Digital Collections.

[114] Janet Wolff, "Gender and the Haunting of Cities (or, the Retirement of the Flâneur)," in *The Invisible Flâneuse: Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, eds. Aruna d'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 24-8.

of predominant Western ideologies in order to construct a knowledge system within which the geographical distinction serves the ultimate function of controlling the Other.[115] Shifting from Western societies to Japan, such representations are nevertheless more suggestive of the intersection of race and gender in the West than informative of the reality in Japan. This last section will consider depictions of Japanese subjects in order to emphasise the problematic relations that underlie the East-West encounter which produced Japonisme. Formed within Western political consciousness, Japonisme carved out a creative space for Western women through representations of the Japanese "Other".

As a faraway land from Europe and America, Japan's charm for the Western audience derived from its cultural as well as geographical distance. By the 1880s, most of the Western public had only obtained an impression of Japan from imported goods or at International Exhibitions. The American scholar Edward Sylvester Morse made a comment that summarises Japan's allure at that moment, "Naturally great curiosity was awakened to know more about the social life of this remarkable [Japanese] people; and particularly was it desirable to know the nature of the house that sheltered such singular and beautiful works of art."[116] This valuation of the Japanese interior is true both literally and metaphorically. Travelling through the parts of Japan virtually unknown to Westerners, Isabella Bird could not resist looking into local working-class homes while praising the upper-middle-class lifestyle, both of which she had easy access to because of her race and nationality.[117] Veiled by inaccessibility, Japan's beauty also fascinated Western artists such as George Henry, whose *Salutations* (1894) is a pastiche of iconic Japanese elements the artist abstracted from photographic sources.[118] Kelly points out that the mysteriousness of the country not only allured but licensed them to produce "faux authentication for the

[115] Said, *Orientalism*, 12-3.

[116] Edward Sylvester Morse, *Japanese Homes and their Surroundings* (Boston: Tichnor, 1886), xxviii.

[117] Andrea Kaston Tange, "Rewriting Fairyland: Isabella Bird and the Spectacle of Nineteenth-Century Japan," in *Women, Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1830s-1900s*, eds., Alexis Easley, Claire Gill and Beth Rodgers (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 270.

[118] Alix Agret, "Hornel's Artistic Context," in *E.A. Hornel: From Camera to Canvas*, eds., Reiss, Ben, Antonia Laurence-Allan and Jennifer Melville (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2020), 30-1.

misleading European notions" of the Orient.[119] As Said argues, such "authentication" transformed Japan into a "median category" that was not entirely foreign nor familiar to the West to the end of subjecting what would have been a threat to Western knowledge and control.[120] Japan became attractive through the Western artists' mediation and the audience's cultural interpretation of it. Consequently, the reality in Japan became less relevant to "Japan" as a cultural construct and imaginative geography that upholds Western ideas and values.

What separated the Western public from Japan was therefore not only geographical remoteness but more importantly a cultural distance that was consciously or unconsciously maintained on a psychological level. This constructed distance becomes particularly complicated in Western women's interaction with Japanese subjects, especially men, because it produced a layered and sometimes fluid sense of otherness from gender, cultural and racial positions. Andrea Kaston Tange stresses that Bird was keenly aware of her position as the outsider on various levels during her travel and used her self-consciously felt otherness vis-à-vis local people to organise her narrative.[121] In addition to the discourse of gender, Bird also had to mediate between her immediate otherness as a traveller and her national and racial position within the broader imperialist discourse that underlaid her travel. Consequently, as Bach points out, it generated an internalised ambivalence regarding Western womanhood.[122] For example, Bird's relationship with her male Japanese interpreter Ito was framed by intersecting discourses of gender and of imperialism and layered identities. Floriane Reviron observes that, upon perceiving Ito's othering of herself by reason of her gender, Bird was anxious to resort to "all the devices common to colonial discourse" in order to reassert her racial and cultural superiority.[123] In another scenario, however, Bird was assured that her racial status superseded her

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[119] Kelly, *French Women Orientalist Artists,* 60-1.

[120] Said, *Orientalism*, 58.

[121] Tange, "Rewriting Fairyland", 273.

[122] Bach, "A Traveller in Skirts", 594.

[123] Floriane Reviron, "Isabella Bird's in Japan: Unbeaten Tracks in Travel Literature," in *Between Two Worlds: Narratives by Female Explorers and Travellers 1850-1945*, eds., Béatrice Bijon and Gérard Gâcon (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 75.

gender identity and thus states, “In many European countries, and certainly in some parts of our own, a solitary lady-traveller in a foreign dress would be exposed to rudeness, insult, and extortion, if not to actual danger; but I have not met with a single instance of incivility or real overcharge [in Japan].”[124] Bird’s different identities constantly reconfigured in relation to each other depending on the specific circumstances. Caught up in various discourses in which they occupied disparate power positions, white Western women often developed complex and ambivalent relationships with Japanese subjects. This complexity resulted in their cultural productions which are fraught with anxiety to define their own identities.

Whereas Isabella Bird had the privilege to actually travel to Japan, many Western women encountered the country as armchair travellers through visual arts and commodities. *Jingles from Japan: As Set Forth by the Chinks* (1901), an illustrated book of verses collaboratively created by Helen Hyde and her sister Mabel, offers an example of the imaginary experience of Japan. The narrative of the book unfolds as a little red-headed girl in a clearly Western dress travels through Japan, meeting native people and experiencing local customs accompanied by a young black-haired woman in a robe that resembles kimono. Their respective physical features establish them as a white American girl and a young Asian woman. However, an important detail on the frontispiece suggests that the white girl is imaginatively rather than physically transported to the Orient. The illustration depicts the white girl riding a turtle out to sea to meet the young Asian woman who is aboard a ship, both reaching their arms to each other and thus symbolising the white girl’s encounter with an imaginary space grounded in her native context. As Yoshihara points out, the protagonist in Louisa May Alcott’s *Eight Cousins* (1875), Rose, also considers seeing the Chinese merchant ships at the harbour as a “trip to China”. To Rose, “China” is an entertaining spectacle and the consumption of which expands her “imaginary, if not physical, sphere” which was crucial for the transition from girlhood to white, middle-class womanhood in postbellum America.[125] Like China to Rose, Japan to the white girl in *Jingles* is a culturally constructed spectacle that can be comfortably experienced via imported artworks and artefacts as well as Japonist works, which renders an actual visit unnecessary if not undesirable.

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[124] Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks*, 184.

[125] Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 20-1.

The illustrations and verses throughout *Jingles* demonstrate the Hyde sisters' consciousness to shed light on ethnographic curiosities while maintaining a safe cultural distance for their white womanhood. It is worth considering the white girl's contrasting relationships with Japanese men and with Japanese women. She always appears at ease and even assumes a dominant position over Japanese women and children; in contrast, she looks frightened by grown men and sometimes seeks protection from her Asian companion, an image that simultaneously maintains the idealised and feminised vision of Japan and "capitalizes on and reinforces the racialized and sexualized images of Japanese men as a threat to the moral fabric of American society and in particular to white female sexuality."[126] However, conforming to American imperialist ideology, Helen Hyde made sure that her readers recognise the threat yet are reassured about their safety. In the scene where the girl seems threatened, the Japanese men are nevertheless deferentially bowing to her. In 'The Lay of the Yoguya', the Japanese curios dealers' intention to take advantage of foreigners suggested by the text is neutralised by the authoritative position the Asian woman assumes while shielding the white girl. The white girl looks particularly confident when she is being carried by two Japanese labourers because the commercial relation confirms her superior status, which was grounded in the West's economic dominance. Depicting the white's girl intimate experience of a diverse range of Japanese life and customs, *Jingle* acquires a sense of authenticity; however, it positions the white girl and, by extension, the American audience at an unbridgeable cultural distance from Japan and therefore consolidates a predefined identity.

Although women like the Hyde sisters were aware of distancing themselves from Japanese subjects, they were also inevitably associated together in the feminine sphere in line with the political strategy to contain the foreign threat as a part of Western visual and commercial culture.[127] Henry Somm's engraving *Japonisme*

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[126] Ibid., 68.

[127] One of the catalogues of A.A. Vantine & Co., *The Wonder Book*, shows an interesting parallel to the structure of *Jingles* by facilitating imaginative travels with commodities while emphasising the store's location in the West. It illustrates the intimate connection between the market for Oriental goods in which Western women dominated and the contemporary cultural and identity politics.

(figure 12) offers a reversal of Henry's cartoon of Hornel by juxtaposing a dominant white woman with caricatured Japanese men.

Figure 12. Henry Somm, *Japonisme*, 1881. Dry point, 27.4 × 36.6 cm. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Depicted in diminutive size, one of the men stands on a stack of books while waving a disproportionately large fan at the woman who looks aloofly and almost impatiently past him. The white woman appears encased in her large bonnet and Western clothes which accentuate and protect her cultural identity; consequently, she is enveloped in a Japanese setting yet looks detached from and presiding over this space. Western women consumed Japanese objects as commodities without engaging with their cultural meanings. This practice within the feminine sphere not only commodified Japanese goods but also discursively "domesticated" Japan; it also paralleled the socio-political concern that Asia must be "carefully monitored and regulated so that it remained within the bounds of artistic whimsy."[128] Systematically constructing Japan as a part of Western visual and material culture, Japonisme obscured the cultural and national entity represented by the commodities for the Western public and accordingly neutralises the political threat posed by the foreign culture. It might also have had an

[128] Yoshihara, *Embracing the East*, 42.

influence on the early historiography of Japonisme which tends to focus on its manifestations in the realm of decorative arts.

To conclude, this essay hopes to have shown that Japonisme consists of a diverse range of cultural, social and political as well as artistic responses by both men and women to the stimuli of Japanese prints. While Cassatt developed an idiosyncratic artistic language and obtained a cultural license to visualise her feminist project during the culture of Japonisme, she inevitably engaged with the intersecting discourses of gender and race that simultaneously facilitated and problematised her artistic production and framed that of Hyde. This essay is aware of its limitation for not addressing the agency exerted by Japanese individuals and institutions in shaping Japonisme as they were crucial mediating forces. Nor does this essay attempt to make the monolithic assumption of Cassatt's prints as a representative of all women's activities as they were bound to operate in and negotiate with contextually specific circumstances. However, underlining that Japonisme involved specifically positioned relations between Western women and Japan, it hopes to alter the Eurocentric approach and challenge the patriarchal canon that neglects to account for Western women's participation in and contribution to the culture of Japonisme. As the product of a cross-cultural encounter that took place in concrete social contexts within which gendered bodies navigated, Japonisme necessarily has a female perspective and reflects Western women as well as men's experiences.

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