

## *Radical subjectivities*

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Translator: Helen Tomlinson

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## REFERENCES

Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, artWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013, (Rethinking art's histories)  
 Catherine de Zegher, *Women's Work Is Never Done: An Anthology*, Gand: AsaMER, 2014  
*Genealogías feministas en el arte español: 1960-2010*, Madrid: The Side Up, 2013. Sous la dir. de Juan Vicente Aliaga et Patricia Mayayo

- 1 The task of renewing the “art and feminism” nexus, of deconstructing it so it does not linger on as a category in art history, is a painstaking one, particularly while following Catherine de Zegher when she writes: “I believe there is a strong sense of ‘relation’ today, a need to attend to ‘all our relations’. You would think we are over-connected, but no. The twentieth century brought disconnection and displacement with it in such a profound way that we didn’t even realize our predicament... Today, there is an aspiration... to reconnect to one another and the world.”<sup>1</sup>
- 2 Within this notion of relationship, one aspiration resides in the connection to work. The use of the word *work* in the titles of two of the publications suggests that the political function of work is above all one of gender, class and ethnicity. One of the sections in *Genealogías feministas en el arte español*<sup>2</sup> evokes a “Sexual Division of the Female Precariat and Work”. Beginning with the year 1960, this chronology of the exhibition covers the Francoist period. This date above all recalls the voting of a law requiring married women to obtain permission from their husband to go out to work. Quite understandably, feminist movements developed alongside communist and anarchist opposition to Franco’s regime. This fact is unique in the history of women in Europe at this time, Spanish women being the only women – besides Portuguese women under Salazar – who had to confront a double dictatorship of patriarchy and the incumbent political powers.

The often hard-hitting artworks created in this context were at the heart of these demands.<sup>3</sup>

- 3 “Women’s work is never done”, declares Catherine de Zegher’s anthology, matter-of-factly pointing out a both constant and inconstant condition peculiar to the artistic experience.<sup>4</sup> The title can be understood in relation to perseverance, whereby women’s work is never done because it must carry on, self-perpetuatingly. In the context of art, this allows the author to affirm a necessary fluidity between forms and concepts. Angela Dimitrakaki adopts a more rigid posture recalling the capitalization of art in a materialist feminist perspective. Though the latter can be understood in relation to radical thought, the argument, split across six chapters,<sup>5</sup> lacks clarity. The intellectual rigour of a Shulamith Firestone, who in 1970 caused an unprecedented furore with *The Dialectic of Sex* – which drew on and surpassed Marxist constructions and helped engineer a shift from class struggle to the struggle between the sexes – is not matched here.<sup>6</sup> Fluctuating definitions of materialist feminism by way of radical feminism reinforce their sometimes paradoxical character, which stiffens into dated vocabulary. It is impossible to maintain an epistemological constancy between the reception of these notions at the start of the 1970s and their reality at the start of the 2010s. The author sometimes struggles to master the inevitable disconnect that arises when this is read in the light of a predatory contemporary art market and from a position that prides itself on its engagement, but fails to extricate itself from the system it intends to critique.
- 4 The other relational factor adduced is the relationship to travel, signified through the concept of “global”. It is simplistic to equate movement (whether transnational or transcultural) with travel alone. Yet if the latter becomes a metaphor for historiographical and archaeological exploration, such as that pursued by Catherine de Zegher, it becomes possible to create mobile *transitions* that convey the very tools of analysis themselves.
- 5 Griselda Pollock’s illuminating and impressive introduction to the anthology *Women’s Work Is Never Done* emphasizes how Catherine de Zegher’s background as an archaeologist has enabled her to attend to “the almost obliterated traces of twentieth-century creativity”.<sup>7</sup> She “approaches art’s histories through the layering, rather than the sequence, of temporalities”.<sup>8</sup> Griselda Pollock points to the importance of an intellectual posture that sets itself against the paradigms of a modernist art history dominated, she says, by a unilateral ethos: the work of artists from certain countries, a single genre – and the whole thing enshrined on a canonical pedestal. In contrast, “de Zegher travels in time (backwards and forwards across the twentieth century) and in space (moving outside of the Euro-American axis to acknowledge the creativity located in Latin America, Asia, Australia, Africa, and Russia)”.<sup>9</sup>
- 6 This voyage in time and space is contemporaneous with postcolonial theories, which were elaborated in parallel with feminist theories and developed at the turn of the 1980s thanks to the exemplary critical positions of Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa and Gayatri C. Spivak. Within this growing awareness, feminism realized that it could not exist in the singular, that it would have to readjust Eurocentric criteria to consider the position of women of colour. The 1990s and 2000s would see the consolidation of concepts of globalization and their association with art and culture, producing sometimes contradictory analyzes, depending on the context.
- 7 Thus, Angela Dimitrakaki (self-)imposes the term *global imperative*: “In deploying the phrase ‘the global imperative’ in the book title I intend to raise curiosity: what is the

global imperative? To what process or processes does it really refer? Who exercises it or aspires to it? If the global imperative belongs to capitalism, it can also belong to a politics of resistance and emancipation, such as feminism.”<sup>10</sup> This stated, she vehemently denies any connection between her use of the term and its use by Maura Reilly, who co-curated *Global Feminisms* with Linda Nochlin in 2007. The term appears in Maura Reilly’s title to her “Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms”: “Feminism’s Global Imperative”.<sup>11</sup> But while she attempts as best she can to didactically make amends for a situation in which white feminism has largely marginalized non-Western artistic and literary practices, Angela Dimitrakaki states that the global imperative is above all a useful concept for materialist feminism. In each we find a reference to Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing, Solidarity*, in which the author spells out the necessity of rereading the erased fragments of history.<sup>12</sup>

- 8 No doubt also wishing to emphasize this point, Catherine de Zegher chooses an interview with Evelyn Nicodemus as the first text in her anthology. Born in Tanzania, the artist moved to Europe in 1973, where she was immediately subjected to a racism inflected by the continent’s colonial past. She then decided to study anthropology, choosing as her research topic the anthropologists of Sweden, the country where she lives. Tautological and reflexive, this unprecedented approach caused something of a stir: “It was like throwing a grenade in their midst”, Evelyn Nicodemus recalls.<sup>13</sup> Catherine de Zegher analyzes this position by confirming that “[c]learly, you were dealing with a colonial construction, wherein objectifying – in fact, negating – the ‘other’ confirms one’s positional difference as much as it establishes a relation of control and power.”<sup>14</sup>
- 9 Objectification meets objectivity. The latter term – common in research and criticism – is used to prove that a posited idea, image, form or function is a remnant of some surpassed universe – one whose effigy was no doubt wrested from the specific and stable surroundings to which it was subjected. Objectivity is adduced when one wants to entrench one’s knowledge in no uncertain terms. When, on the contrary, one wishes to affirm a subjectivity, a more fluid posture emerges. This posture is riskier because it is more unstable, but equally, more engaged. It allows for an opening out of pathways in which the art you observe, study or analyze, the text you read, the speech you hear, record or relay, does not point in a unilateral direction but lies on a road in which the rough patches, more than making you lose your footing, make you lighter on your feet.
- 10 *Notwithstanding their differences*, the three works considered here are each concerned in their own way with a wholly radical subjectivity. This can be observed in Beatriz Preciado’s concluding essay to *Genealogías feministas en el arte español: 1960-2010*, which offers a synthesis of feminist positions in global current affairs (for example, Pussy Riot) and compares these artistic events to punk performances.<sup>15</sup> The analogy with the fragmentary vocabulary of punk nourishes (no metaphor intended) critical and sexual stances in which feminist positions – but also women – are necessarily plural because of their subjectivities. It is also in evidence – less bluntly but equally directly – in Catherine de Zegher’s critical approach. The way she enriches her reflections about artists with references inferring that the personal space of artworks must be accompanied by an interpretation that is *also* personal displays real intellectual rigour. The anthology reproduces one of her essays published on Martha Rosler: “Passionate signals, Martha Rosler’s flowers in the field of vision”. In it she studies a short film (*Flower Fields*) that the artist produced in Super-8 in 1975 and which, as its name suggests, shows a field of flowers. Catherine de Zegher points out in her text that this film had never been aired in

public before the first retrospective of Martha Rosler's work in 1999, which she curated.<sup>16</sup> The author examines this invisibility and the meaning it conveys. While conducting research in the artist's archives, she discovered that Rosler had kept hundreds of her images of the flowers. Using the flowers to develop an allegorical approach that zeroes in on the critical function of the artist's work, Catherine de Zegher concludes her text on an introspective note: "Captive also of the flower's circular and layered structure, this essay can be considered a first attempt on the basis of theory and history to analyze Rosler's invaluable work – particularly her tableaux of field flowers or flower fields – which scrutinizes the real, imaginary, and symbolic in relation to the gaze."<sup>17</sup> It is the very limpidity of feminist subjectivity in art criticism that is revealed here: affirming one's position in relation to oneself and to others. While flowers belong to a purportedly feminine category, Griselda Pollock, referring to Catherine de Zegher's text, emphasizes that women are not part of a uniform category. "[W]e can 'see' and 'sense' the contributions of artists who are women from many different times, places, histories, and artistic modes to our overall understanding of art's vital spaces in our cultural and political histories."<sup>18</sup>

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## NOTES

1. Catherine de Zegher, quoted by Moira Roth in her preface "A Circular Path, travelling with Catherine de Zegher in Space and Time", *Women's work is never done*, Gand: AsaMER, 2014, p. 11. The anthology is made up of articles and interviews.
2. *Genealogías feministas en el arte español: 1960-2010*, Madrid: The Side Up, 2013. Edited by Juan Vicente Aliaga, Patricia Mayayo
3. Feminist interventions – inflected by contemporary art and imagined in a political and social perspective – were particularly dynamic in Spain at the start of the 1990s. A prominent example is the inimitable experimental art centre Arteleku (<http://www.arteleku.net>) in San Sebastian, which is both artists' residence and feminist research centre.
4. The title is taken from the series *Woman's Work is Never Done*, produced by the artist Yolanda Lopez in 1995.
5. "Feminist politics and art history: from postmodernism to global capitalism" (pp. 1-23), "The gender issue': lessons from post-socialist Europe" (pp. 25-70), "Travel as (gendered) work: global space, mobility and the 'woman artist'" (pp. 71-106), "Gendered economies and knowledge production: Ursula Biemann's video essays and materialist feminism for the twenty-first century" (p. 107-149), "Masculinity and the economic subject in contemporary art" (pp. 151-182), "Acting on power: critical collectives, curatorial visions and art as life" (pp. 183-207).
6. Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*, New York: Farrar; Straus and Giroux, 2003 [1970]
7. Pollock, Griselda. "Introduction", *Women's Work. Is Never Done*, op. cit., p. 13. This publication, edited by Catherine de Zegher, offers readers the chance to journey through the works of twenty-seven female artists. A list at the end of the book shows that the latter were chosen from over two hundred female artists. This thoroughness elegantly undermines the labelling of women's art as a "minority" art form.

8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. Dimitrakaki, Angela. *Gender, ArtWork And the Global Imperative*, op. cit., p. 7
11. Reilly, Maura. "Introduction: Toward Transnational Feminisms", *Global Feminisms, New Directions in Contemporary Art*, New York: Merrel; Brooklyn Museum, 2007, pp. 28-38 for this section in particular.
12. Talpade Mohanty, Chandra. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing, Solidarity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003
13. De Zegher, Catherine. "Black, The Color of Joy and Pain, a Conversation with Everlyn Nicodemus", *Women's work is never done*, op. cit., p. 33. The interview was conducted in 1991.
14. *Ibid.*
15. Preciado, Beatriz. "OCCUPY SEX notas desde la revolución feministapornopunk", *Genealogías feministas en el arte español : 1960-2010*, op. cit., p. 277
16. Martha Rosler: *Positions in the Life World*. Catherine de Zegher curated the exhibition and also edited the sister publication (Birmingham, Vienne, Cambridge: MA; Ikon Gallery; Generali Foundation; The MIT Press, 1999)
17. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
18. Pollock, Griselda. "Introduction", *Women's Work Is Never Done*, op. cit., p. 13