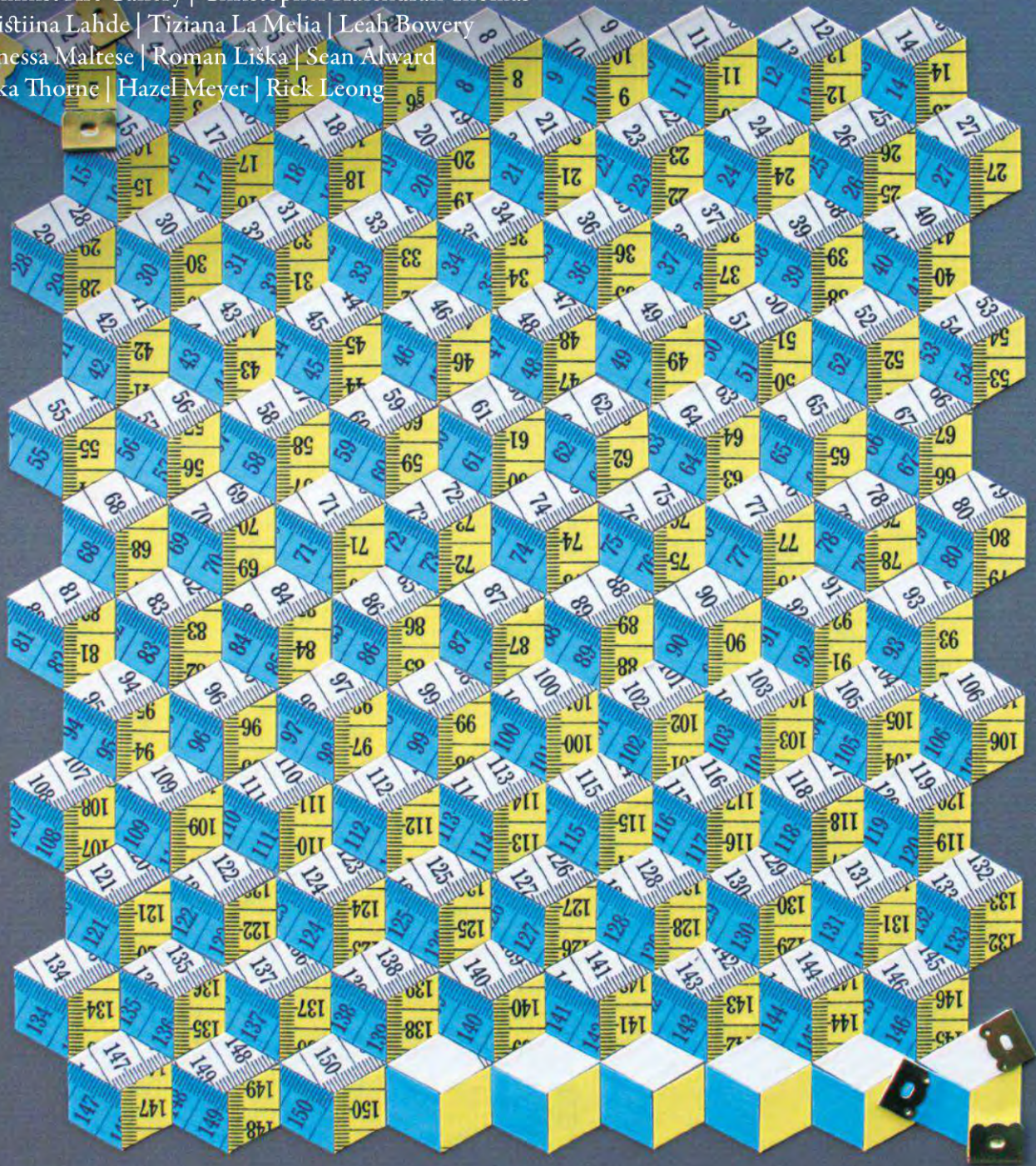


cmagazine **17**

International Contemporary Art
Spring 2013

Hito Steyerl | Feminism After Elles | Institutions by Artists
Feminist Art Gallery | Christopher Kulendran Thomas
Kristiina Lahde | Tiziana La Melia | Leah Bowery
Vanessa Maltrese | Roman Liška | Sean Alward
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17



Graham Dolphin, *Wall (Walk in Silence)* (detail), 2012 Courtesy Seventeen, London, David Risley Gallery, Copenhagen



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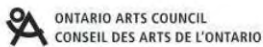
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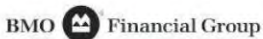
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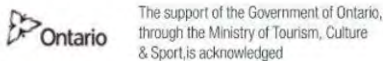
grain(s) with public rehearsals of performance April 15-19 Performance April 20
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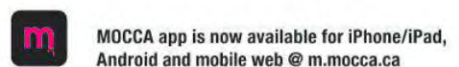
May 1- June 2, 2013



***CONTACT 2013 - Collected Shadows,
 A Selection from the Archive of Modern Conflict***



Co-presented by the Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art



Editorial

- 2 Issue 117: Translation
by *Amish Morrell*

Features

- 4 *Le baiser de l'institution:*
Feminism After *Elles*
by *Ania Wroblewski*
- 16 Institutions by Artists:
Resistance or Retreat?
by *Diana Sherlock*
- 22 Beyond Measure:
Systems of Chance in the
Art of *Kristiina Lahde*
by *Kristin Campbell*
- 32 Dancing in the Face of Danger
Hito Steyerl in Conversation with Patricia Reed
- 36 Rehearsal for a Poem
Tiziana La Melia in Conversation
with *Jacquelyn Ross*

Exhibition Reviews

- 42 XTRAVAGANZA:
Staging Leigh Bowery
Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna
by *Yuki Higashino*
- 43 Roman Liška: Nu Balance
Rod Barton Gallery, London
by *Dan Munn*
- 44 Sean Alward: A Vertical
City Goes Both Ways
Access Gallery, Vancouver
by *Marina Roy*
- 45 Kika Thorne: The WILDCraft
Art Gallery of Windsor,
Windsor
by *Michael DiRisio*
- 46 Archival Dialogues: Reading
the Black Star Collection
Ryerson Image Centre,
Toronto
by *Heather White*
- 47 Vanessa Maltese:
Two-fold Tally,
Erin Stump Projects, Toronto
by *Bill Clarke*
- 48 Nicolas Grenier: Proximities
Galérie Art Mûr, Montreal
by *James D. Campbell*
- 51 Michèle Provošt:
Rebranding Bytown
Bytown Museum, Ottawa
by *Petra Halkes*
- 51 Rick Leong:
The Sublimation of Self
Anna Leonowens Gallery,
Halifax
by *Jane Affleck*
- 52 Hazel Meyer:
Walls to the Ball
Eastern Edge, St. Johns
by *Craig Francis Power*
- 53 A New Novel by
Bjarne Melgaard
Luxembourg & Dayan,
New York
by *Nickolas Calabrese*

Book Reviews

- 55 *One for Me and One to Share:*
Artists' Multiples and Editions,
Edited by Dave Dymant and
Gregory Elgstrand
review by *David Senior*
- 56 *Open! Key Texts, 2004–2012:*
Art, Culture and the Public
Domain
Edited by Jorinde Seijdel and
Liesbeth Melis
review by *Petra Hawkes*
- 56 *Disturbances,* by Critical
Art Ensemble
review by *Marc James Léger*
- 57 *Summer of Hate,*
by Chris Kraus
review by *Tess Edmonson*
- 58 Noteworthy
by *Shannon Garden-Smith*

Artist Project

centrefold & IBC: WHEN PLATITUDES BECOME FORM
by *Christopher Kulendran Thomas*

pages 10–14: FAGING IT FORWARD
by *The Feminist Art Gallery (FAG), Toronto*

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

front cover
Kristiina Lahde, MetricSystem
(white and blue), 2012, Altered
measuring tapes, 44.5 × 38.5 cm
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Le baiser de l'institution: Feminism After Elles

by Ania Wroblewski

Feminism is a revolution, not a rearranged marketing strategy, or some kind of promotion of fellatio or swinging; not just a matter of increasing secondary wages. Feminism is a collective adventure, for women, men and everyone else. A revolution, well under way. A worldview. A choice. It's not a matter of contrasting women's small advantages with men's small assets, but of sending the whole lot flying.

—Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, 2010.

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

FEMINISM'S SEMANTIC DANCE

If 2007 has been generally deemed “the year of feminism” by the American arts press, the discussions started by the numerous important feminist exhibitions and conferences of that busy calendar year are certainly still being held today. Arising from the scholarship surrounding exhibitions such as *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, and events such as the “Feminist Future: Theory and Practice in the Visual Arts” symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, is a debate about the contemporary use and value of the term “feminism.” Can the theories, concepts and political objectives of feminism be made relevant in today’s varied cultural landscape? Or, are we, as Cornelia Butler argues, currently in a “postfeminist, post-identity politics moment”?²

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

Recently, we have been told by a number of prominent feminists from various generations that feminism is dead. We are troubled that this is their perception when we see so much life in it still... The tendency to treat [the 1960s and 70s] as a feminist ground zero centralizes the discourse and limits its meaningful articulation to a handful of strategies and practices... This produces a hierarchy within feminism that fails to consider its multifaceted relationship to the ground on which it is enacted.³

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

AVOIDING “FEMINISM”

What about those who choose *not* to take up the feminist discussion directly? Such is the situation in France, where feminism or at least

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

Over the course of almost two years, 2.5 million visitors discovered close to one thousand works by more than three hundred women artists from the Pompidou’s collection, representing what Camille Morineau, the exhibition’s primary curator, and Alfred Pacquement, the museum’s director, hoped to be a rich and varied history of 20th century art. *Elles* was generally well received, but the show’s detractors immediately and unfairly called out the organizers for ghettoizing women artists. Quite obviously, *elles@centrepompidou* was based on exclusion—that of works by men—but unlike the Pompidou’s 1995 show *Féminin-Masculin. Le sexe de l’art*, its goal was never specifically to deal with issues of gender relations in art. *Elles* was actually as much an interrogation of the politics of collecting as an exhibition about women artists. By focusing particularly on the museum’s role in writing art history and by proposing that women’s artworks are as representative of the “established” narrative as are works by men, Morineau and Pacquement hoped to dispel gender determinisms in the arts. They did this, commendably, at the risk of exposing gaps and lacks in the Pompidou’s collection.

In the preface and introductory essays to the exhibition catalogue, Morineau and Pacquement go to great lengths to frame and put into context what they both describe as a manifesto. Significantly, both organizers work to distance their project from feminist concerns. Situating *Elles* in relation to the various feminist exhibitions of 2007, Pacquement notes, “It seemed to us that reducing recent or less recent artistic creation to...militant attitudes only partially accounted for the growing presence and impact of women artists in contemporary art.”⁴ Morineau is more forward as she tries to nuance the exhibition’s *raison d’être*: “The Mnam is exhibiting only women, and yet the goal is neither to show that female art exists nor to produce a feminist event, but to present the public with a hanging that appears to offer a good history of twentieth-century art.”⁵ In addition to this, a

very tangible reticence towards the word “feminism” seemed to traverse the entire exhibition. For example, the two sections dedicated most explicitly to feminist histories, sections which grouped together the works of VALIE EXPORT, Orlan, Hannah Wilke, Sigalit Landau and Andrea Fraser, among others, did not point to feminist content directly but instead were titled more poetically, “Fire At Will” and “The Body Slogan.” The back cover of the *Elles* catalogue explicitly states what Kennedy and Linden would call the semantic problem at hand: “Neither the viewpoint adopted nor the resulting works can be limited by simplistic labels such as ‘feminine’ or ‘feminist.’”

In light of this kind of *framing away* from feminism while taking on feminist works and concerns, the object of the organizers’ so-called manifesto becomes unclear. If it is not a feminist action to mount an all-women permanent collection exhibition at a national art centre in a country where, as Morineau herself points out, “male-female equality is proclaimed as a necessity yet is so far from being achieved,”⁶ what exactly is it, then?

BLUEPRINTS

When faced with Morineau’s initial plans for an exhibition including permanent collection and borrowed works that would directly tackle the lack of discourse around feminism in France, the previous question becomes even more pressing. As she writes in the first draft of her exhibition proposal, titled *Femmes, féminités, féminismes*, “while feminist ideas are largely explored in the American art scene, in Europe and notably in France, they are given unsatisfactory attention.”⁷ The exhibition, as she proposed it, was to explore multiple versions of feminism chronologically, in three distinct parts: an introduction to modern and avant-garde movements from 1910 to 1960 that criticized the clichéd image of the woman; a comprehensive section about 60s and 70s militant feminist art practices organized thematically according to headings such as “Against Patriarchal Domination” and “Against the Woman-Object”; and finally, a critical look at feminism since the 80s that zeroed in on globalism, politics and the idea of the body reimagined in light of queer theory and AIDS.⁸ Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) was to open the exhibition in the museum’s main forum. Morineau also planned to include works by Rose Sélavy (Marcel Duchamp’s alter ego), Victor Burgin, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley and other male artists in order to paint a complex, forward-thinking and inclusive portrait of feminism’s history.

Morineau’s next draft—this time called *Plurielles*—is a vague blueprint of what would eventually become *elles@centrepompidou*.⁹ No longer centred on feminism, the proposed exhibition’s driving force was its place in history as the first-ever long-running permanent collection show of art by women. Not surprisingly, the key difference between the second plan and the final product is related to feminist content. Morineau was intent on dedicating part of *Plurielles* to feminist history, featuring a dynamic series of rooms titled “Feminists or Rebels? At the Heart of a Political Revolution.”¹⁰ Since no such open discussion about feminism took place within the *elles@centrepompidou* exhibition space, these early documents are



above & pg. 8
Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden, Documentation from *BACK TO THE FUTURE...an experimental discussion on contemporary feminist practice...*, February 21, 2009, Whitney Museum of Art, New York
PHOTO: LIZ LASER

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

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

STRATEGIES FOR THE FEMINIST FUTURE

The Pompidou’s call for institutional self-reflexivity did not go unheard by other art centres. One year after *elles@centrepompidou*’s opening, MoMA presented *Pictures by Women: A History of Modern Photography*, an exhibition of over 200 photographs by women from the museum’s permanent collection, and hosted the “Art Institutions and Feminist Politics Now” symposium at which Camille Morineau spoke. Equally interesting to note is the all-women permanent collection exhibition Esther Trépanier organized to mark her beginning as director of the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec (MNBAQ) in 2009, titled *Femmes artistes. La conquête d’un espace, 1900–1965*.¹⁵ In 2010, Pierre Landry continued Trépanier’s project with a show focused on the MNBAQ’s contemporary collections. Although neither of the MNBAQ shows took on a specifically feminist position, both endeavoured to present a more nuanced narrative of Quebec art history while exploring women artists’ fraught journey to achieve professional status.

The *elles@centrepompidou* “challenge” was most recently taken up by the Seattle Art Museum. From October 11, 2012 to January 13, 2013, two exhibitions of art by women were featured at the SAM: *Elles: Women Artists from the Centre Pompidou*, a condensed and re-vamped version of the Paris show, and *Elles: SAM—Singular*

Works by Seminal Women Artists, a permanent collection exhibition (albeit fleshed out with works borrowed locally). City-wide partnerships with smaller galleries, theatre and performing arts venues, libraries and the University of Washington’s Women’s Center expanded the effusive *Elles* spirit outside of the museum’s walls. However, given the show’s brevity and uncritically affirmative marketing (for instance, viewers were encouraged to donate at least \$50 in order to add a name to the museum’s Wall of Women), the SAM’s girl-power-friendly slogan “Women Take Over” felt temporary and left the unfortunate impression that rescuing women’s works from the vaults, even as a way to defy institutional structures, could be a means to an end, a way of marketing the image, not the reality, of women’s artistic empowerment.

Nevertheless, the subtle test Camille Morineau posed to the very institution that employs her is proof that feminism can be practised today, if not by discussing it openly, then by setting an example and developing strategies that pave the way for institutional change. Change, though, cannot only be conceived as adding works signed by women to a collection, publishing more monographs about women artists or striving for gender equity in exhibition opportunities. Aruna D’Souza rightly points out that the museum must “reimagine itself... according to the political imperatives of feminist art itself,”¹⁶ or, one could add, according to the call of difference. Change, thus, is not simply a matter of numbers or space; it is, as Virginie Despentes so colourfully reminds us, a question of attitudes, work and will.

This sentiment has never been as apparent as in Canada, where very recently, Allyson Mitchell and Deirdre Logue, co-founders of the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto, as well as Louise Déry, director of the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) gallery and jury member for the 2012 Sobey Art Award, manipulated the system, so to speak, through powerful back-door feminist gestures. In May 2012, Mitchell and Logue were invited to speak at the Tate Modern. Instead of taking advantage of this opportunity to describe their own creative projects, Mitchell and Logue brought along eight artists to share the spotlight and participate in a queer show-and-tell titled the “Axe Grinding Workshop.” This is just one example of their inclusive motto to always “FAG it forward”¹⁷ by pooling resources, breaking down hierarchies and gender boundaries, and creating opportunities while promoting creativity. As for Louise Déry, she is the motivating force behind Québec’s unprecedented move to put forward exclusively women artists—Olivia Boudreau, Raphaëlle de Groot, Julie Favreau, Nadia Myre, and Ève K. Tremblay—for the 2012 Sobey Art Award Long List. When asked in an email exchange whether this was a strategic plan or a pragmatic reflection of the region’s top artists—who also *happened to be women*, Déry confirmed the politics of her bold move: “My colleagues knew right away what I was getting at. In brief, I nominated five women, among many artists whose work I admire, to assure that at least one would be a finalist.”¹⁸ Surely in part due to Déry’s passionate initiative, Québec’s Raphaëlle de Groot was finally awarded the grand prize, after being nominated five times.

“The deliberate choice to step away from a feminist vocabulary in order to avoid producing an event that could potentially be ‘reduced’ to its feminist content reveals much about institutional fears and lingering social stigmas.”



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

Whatever their personal agendas or understandings of feminism may be, Mitchell and

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

I would like to thank Louise Déry, Amelia Jones, Jen Kennedy, Maryse Lavièvre, Steve Lyons, Trista Mallory, Catherine Mavrikakis, Kevin Rodgers and Robin Simpson, for our fruitful conversations and exchanges, and in particular, Camille Morineau, for very graciously giving me access to the elles@centrepompidou archive.

BIO

Ania Wroblewski is completing a PhD in contemporary French women’s writing at Université de Montréal. She is the founder, with Jen Kennedy, of the Centre de pédagogie féministe/Centre for Feminist Pedagogy (feministpedagogy.org), currently based at her apartment in Montreal.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, translated by Stéphanie Benson (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2010), 136.
- 2 Cornelia H. Butler, “The Feminist Present: Women Artists at MoMA,” in Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds., *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 26. For more reactions to 2007’s feminist exhibitions and events, see also Amelia Jones’ chapter “The Return of Feminism(s) and the Visual Arts, 1970/2009,” in Malin Hedlin Hayden and Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe, eds., *Feminisms Is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 11–56 as well as “Feminist Time: A Conversation,” an article by Rosalyn Deutsche, Aruna D’Souza, Miwon Kwon, Ulrike Müller, Mignon Nixon and Senam Okudzeto published in *Grey Room* 31 (Spring 2008), 32–67.
- 3 Jen Kennedy and Liz Linden, “Making Ourselves Visible,” *Alphabet Prime* 1 (2009), 16.
- 4 Alfred Paquement, “Preface,” in *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 12. In a post-script to her previously mentioned chapter, Amelia Jones, who spoke to Camille Morineau about the challenges of putting together *Elles* in October 2009, points out Paquement’s erratic and contradictory framing of the exhibition.
- 5 Camille Morineau, “elles@centrepompidou: Addressing Difference,” in *elles@centrepompidou: Women Artists in the Collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre de Création Industrielle* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2009), 16.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Camille Morineau, *Femmes, féminités, féminismes*, Document in *elles@centrepompidou* archive, consulted on July 20, 2012 at the office of C. Morineau (Mnam/CCI Centre Pompidou, Paris, France), 1. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from French are by the author.)
- 8 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 9 Camille Morineau, *Plurielles*, Document in *elles@centrepompidou* archive (Mnam/CCI Centre Pompidou, Paris, France), 1.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 11 Camille Morineau, “elles@centrepompidou: Addressing Difference,” 15.
- 12 Aruna D’Souza, “‘Float the Boat!’: Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum,” in Cornelia H. Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds., *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art), 60.
- 13 Emmanuelle Lequeux, “Elles’ décrochées au Centre Pompidou. L’acrochage féminin du Musée d’art moderne a attiré 2,5 millions de visiteurs en un an,” *Le Monde*, March 8, 2011, 22.
- 14 Suzanne Muchnic, “At Paris’ Pompidou Center, the Year of the Women,” *LA Times*, May 24, 2009, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/news/arts/la-ca-elles24-2009may24-0,1787983.story> (accessed December 1, 2012).
- 15 In an email to the author on December 11, 2012, Esther Trépanier explained that she began planning this exhibition in September 2008, before she had heard about the Pompidou’s show. In fact, *Femmes artistes. La conquête d’un espace, 1900–1965*, on view from May 7, 2009 to August 6, 2009, opened a few short weeks before *elles@centrepompidou*.
- 16 Aruna D’Souza, “‘Float the Boat!’: Finding a Place for Feminism in the Museum,” 59.
- 17 See Joanne Latimer, “The Feminist Art Gallery Fights Back With Fabric,” *Madeans.ca*, July 4, 2012.
- 18 Louise Déry, email message to the author, December 10, 2012.



Mary Pratt, *Silver Fish on Crimson Foil*, 1987. Oil on masonite. 46.7 x 69.5 cm. Collection of Brendan and Renée Paddick




MAY 11 – SEPTEMBER 8, 2013

MARY PRATT

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A project by The Rooms Provincial Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, with support from the Department of Canadian Heritage, Museums Assistance Program.

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