

Art Criticism and Gender

Panel 5

MODERATION
ELKE BUHR

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»Yihadismo de Género«: Anti-Feminist Lexical Arsenals of Spanish National-Populism***Miguel Rivas Venegas***

In his contribution, Miguel Rivas Venegas analyses populist currents in politics, especially on the basis of the language used by the protagonists concerned, using the example of Spain with parties such as Podemos, Vox, and the Partido Popular. Friend-foe schemata and constructions of a ›people‹ based on exclusion, as well as the ›will of the people‹ along rigid notions of gender roles, determine the communication of these parties in public and especially in digital social media. The verbal downplaying of violence against women – at least with reference to their own ›in-group‹ of the national ›people‹ – is an integral part of this rhetoric. Rivas Venegas traces the motives behind this discriminatory speech of gender equality issues as ›gender ideology‹ and reminds us of the need for our constant vigilance for the rights of women and minorities.

RE/WRITING HISTORY. Art Criticism as a Vehicle of Change in the Era of #MeToo***Belinda Grace Gardner***

From a review and overview of key historical positions and actions of feminist art and art criticism, such as the Guerrilla Girls, Lucy Lippard, and Cindy Nemser, Belinda Grace Gardner's lecture builds a bridge to the debates around #MeToo, as an amplification of already existing voices against discrimination of women, and the kind of presence of women artists in their field of activity, in exhibitions, magazines, and leadership positions. In the wake of the discussions, Gardner sees a breaking open of male dominance in the art world, which is also reflected, for example, in the posthumous re-evaluations of the works of women artists – a gesture that can, however, also be viewed critically as oriented towards a market hungry for new discoveries. Nevertheless, the status quo of a masculine ›preponderance‹ in the ranks of the represented and representative in art must continue to be overtaken, and increasingly so, through a public engagement with women artists of the past and present.



Fig. 8: Demonstration in Granada, 8 March 2018

Miguel Rivas Venegas

The exponential growth of the Spanish extreme-right, represented both by the recently formed radical party *Vox* and a refounded *Partido Popular*, reinforced and stimulated the expansion of national-populist politics at both sides of the political spectrum. Long-time established left-wing nationalist parties, such as *EH Bildu* in the Basque-speaking territories, as well as the progressive party *Podemos* in the rest of the Spanish State, represent, on the other hand, the left-wing counterpart in a political scenario in which the vindication of patriotism and concepts such as ›fatherland‹ and ›national pride‹ are no more patrimony of the conservative forces. The Catalan crisis, the still escalating situation after the results of the repressed referendum of 1st October 2017 in Catalunya, reinforced nationwide a political scenario characterised by strongly dichotomy-based worldviews and language use. Clear-cut self-representation and political-performative strategies, which accompany the radicalisation of the lexical arsenals of national-populist political movements, define the difference between ›us‹ and ›them‹ and reinforce the Schmittean conception of politics as war-like confrontation, which characterises the so called ›momento populista‹ (Chantal Mouffe 2018) in Spain.¹ The ›populist Zeitgeist‹,² as Cas Mudde named it years ago in his widely-known publication (2004), seems to be regaining strength in a political arena in which the echoes of the so-called ›rhetorics of the Civil War‹, and its old lexical arsenals articulate again political communication of Spanish politics.

To analyse the Spanish case, deeply connected with the current expansion of populist tendencies worldwide, requires a brief mention of the main methodological stances – to be articulated in three main groups, as stated by Gidron and Bonikovsky (2013) – which grasp the study of this expanding political phenomenon through different angles. Without aiming to enlarge the already vast debate on the nature of populism, I will briefly describe them, acquiring at the same time a stance towards the study of a political feature that seems to regain relevance and reappear, as stated by Lorin Zanna (2014), like a phreatic source.

The first one, presented by the highly-influential works of Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser (2004, 2012), faces and categorises populism as a ›thin-centered ideology‹, whose ›thinness‹ allows populism to develop itself both in left-wing and right-wing political contexts.³ A second tendency, presented by the works of Kenneth Roberts (2006), Kurt Weyland (2001) and Robert Jansen (2011), approach populism by conceiving it essentially as political strategy, as a form of organisation and mobilisation. A third stance, mainly presented by the particularly well known works – since they were used as guidelines by some political parties in Spain such as *Podemos* – of Ernesto Laclau (1985, 2005), Chantal Mouffe (1985, 2018), Francisco Panizza (2005) or Michael Kazin (1995), conceives

1 Chantal Mouffe, ›El momento populista‹, auf: *El País*, 10.06.2016, https://elpais.com/elpais/2016/06/06/opinion/1465228236_594864.html 2018 (07.11.2020).

2 Cas Mudde, ›The Populist Zeitgeist‹, in: *Government and Opposition* 39,4/2004, S. 541–563.

3 Cas Mudde and Cristóbal Kaltwasser, (Eds.) *Populism in Europe and the Americas*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012. p. 544.

populism as a »way of making claims about politics«, giving particular relevance to its rhetorical dimension. This is – due to the essentially rhetorical characteristics of populism as political phenomenon – the stance towards populism that interests me the most.

Independently from the three major tendencies that grasp populism, »one of the most contested concepts of social sciences«⁴ from different perspectives and methodological angles, there are certain core characteristics that have been almost unanimously identified as basic elements of populism. We will briefly list some of them to justify why we label parties such as *Vox* and the *Partido Popular* as paradigmatic examples of national-populism: the development of a very particular language use – something that can be identified, following the work of Tolmach Lakoff (1990), as a »special language«; the sharply defined elaboration of a national »self«, to be confronted with a typified »other«, which is depicted as out-group, and presented as pathological in highly *Freund/Feind* Schmittian terms; the understanding of the political as a war-like scenario, and the in-group as holistic community; the simultaneous sublimation of the »people« and its will, which shall eventually surpass or transcend the relevance of democratic results; and the deification of the political leader, who is presented as the »voice of the people« and as lone fighter against the tyranny of the traditional political caste. In the specific case of right-wing populism, the assemblage of this aforementioned holistic community implies as well the construction of stiff, radically defined gender roles for those identified as part of the in-group, and for those who articulate their nemesis.

The »true Spain« against the »feminazis«. Building a national enemy.

[The gender equality and protection law] promotes and funds the war between genders, ideologically corrupts language and will poison, until their effective extinction, heterosexual relations with an unacceptable judicial intromission in the private sphere of the citizens. It starts from the premise of presumption of the male's guilt in sexual relations, which are de facto consensually agreed.⁵

Vox España was founded in 2013 following the example of European parties such as *AfD* or the *Front National*. It defines itself as the only alternative to »the coward right with complexes« and as revulsive to Catalan and Basque nationalism, »gender ideology«, and »gender yihadism«. In the period from the end of 2016 to the beginning of 2019, the radical national-populist party turned political irrelevance into nationwide success: the 47.000 (0.20%) votes of 2016 general elections became 2.6 million in April 2019 (10.26%) and granted the extreme right-wingers 24 seats in the Congress. There are clearly two aspects that provoked, during these three years, the escalation of a political »alternative« whose values are based on the defence of *white* male privileges and national-unionist radical populism. The polarisation of Spanish public opinion in relationship with the Catalan

4 Hans Georg Betz, »The Radical Right and Populism«, in: Jens Rydgren (Ed.) *The Oxford handbook of the radical right*, New York, 2018. pp. 86-104.

5 *Vox*, *Communiqué on the wrongly called gender-based violence law*, July 2018. <https://www.voxespana.es/noticias/comunicado-de-vox-sobre-la-mal-llamada-violencia-de-genero-20180717> (14.09.2019).

political crisis has been accompanied by the growth of the paranoid discourse regarding the so-called »feminisation of society«. The everyday stronger mass mobilisations against gender inequality and violence against women – to take a revealing example, on the last 8th March 450,000 people demonstrated in Madrid and 200,000 in Bilbao – have been interpreted by this radical ingroup as a threat to male equality. On the other hand, the outcome of the trial against the self-labelled »Manada« (Wolfpack), a group of five Men – some of them police officers and soldiers – who mass-raped an 18 year-old girl during the celebration of San Fermín Feast in 2016 provoked a chain reaction of certain violent sectors of the patriarchy towards the »feminazis« – as they call them. Certain conservative, anti-feminist sectors of male public opinion reacted in social media to this trial as if it was a »political or politicised trial« against men. The results of the trial were, as we will explain later in detail, used by *Vox* to stir up hatred against the gender-based law. The majority of the voters of this party, as official statistics reveal, are men between 35 and 44, living in small villages (less than 2,000 inhabitants) and who self-identify as extreme-right wingers.

Most of the political success of *Vox* is to be directly related with their fake news campaigns in the social media, which also counted with the support and assessment of the already well-known alternative-right media guru Steve Bannon. Their propagandistic formula presents no great differences to those of similar national-populist political actors worldwide: a strongly anti-elite discourse is accompanied with a clear-cut definition of an »external enemy« – in this case, some unclear form of extreme-left complot-like interventionism, an internal »other«: the nationalists and their so-called »allies«; the centre-left parties from the Social democrats (PSOE) to *Podemos* – and a radical defence of »Spanish cultural values«, considered »in danger« because of the corrosive action of peripheral nationalisms, »totalitarian feminism« and immigration. The fight against the so-called »gender ideology« is also, in the Spanish case, a factor which implies the development of extremely aggressive lexical arsenals, articulated through a very simple, but extremely effective idea: the heterosexual male, and with him, the mere survival of the national community, is in danger. This paranoid idea of extinction has been, in fact, the core of the official discourse of the most radical wings of Spanish Catholic church for years. Such narrative achieved until recent times limited success amongst the lines of the *Partido Popular*, but the escalation of *Vox* has also radicalised the discourse of the long-lasting right-wing Party. Pablo Casado, President of the *Partido Popular* and presidential candidate since June 2018, stimulated this paranoia by frontally charging against women's rights, claiming that the abortion law should go back to its most restrictive version of 1985. The reason: to stop the »abortion happy-hour« promoted by the left.

It is not a big surprise that the same rhetorical gurus – we make reference again to Steve Bannon – who gave support to the *AfD* and similar platforms in Germany, recommended to codify and reinterpret violence against women as if they were »importierte Gewaltexzesse«, as claimed by German *Identitäre* in Augsburg (2018). The declarations of Santiago Abascal, co-founder and actual President of *Vox* are, in this regard, particularly revealing: eventual forms of violence against women may exist, but they are perpetrated by »the other«. An argument that simultaneously justifies closing the frontiers and abolishing the »ley de violencia de género«:

»We do not want a law that criminalises men. We want an intrafamilial violence law that protects women, but also men (...) We know that this form of violence is related with the presence of certain kind of immigration, and we affirm this with no shame.«⁶

Pablo Casado made similar declarations in relationship with violence against women, as it was a label to abolish. »In a democratic, free country like ours, it makes no sense to talk about violence against a certain gender or age; it makes no sense to underline if it is committed against women, elderly people or children.«⁷ The political decision of eradicating any mention to violence carried against women motivated the overuse of rhetorical pirouettes, extremely vague concepts and euphemistic creations such as »violence occurred in the specific ambit of the family«. Warnings of Pablo Casado to »Muslims« related barbarism, violence against women and radicalism in a way which perfectly fitted the political agenda of the extreme right: »in this country we don't do clitoris ablation, we don't slaughter lambs at home, we don't have [unless imported] home security problems (...) either you are able to adapt to our way of life or it means you are in the wrong country.«⁸

The deployment of certain narratives around the idea of »losing the national identity« is strictly connected with the above-mentioned key-concept of »feminisation of society«. A notion constantly present in the discourse of the fascist and ultra-conservative intellectuals that gave consistence to the political *Weltanschauung* of the Spanish counter-revolutionary forces of 1936's coup d'état. We will quote, in this case, the words of Vox MP Rocío Monasterio in relationship with the Spanish »ley de violencia de género«, approved in 2004 to guarantee more protection for women. This protection could be related with aggressions carried by unknown perpetrators, but also and particularly, by intimate partners, ex-husbands or ex-boyfriends. The strategy of the extreme right is to deny the very concept of violence against women, and to talk about an »indoctrination« process carried by the State through the implementation of this law:

»The law of gender ideology not only destroys the very simple principle of equality, it also badly violates the rights and freedom of the Spaniards. It is a law that is based on non-scientific parameters; it is a law that claims that our gender identity depends on our desire and will (...) it prosecutes everyone who dares to question this totalitarian ideology, it frontally attacks the freedom of, for example, the media, which is obliged to follow certain protocols, certain language use, which is obliged to tell this doctrine.«⁹

The victory that Vox and their political allies from the *Partido Popular* are looking for, is strictly a rhetorical victory: the imposition of terminology such as »violencia intrafamiliar« or »ideología de género« permits to blur the differences between violence motivated by male chauvinism and any other form of violence. Extreme right-wingers from Vox

6 Public declarations of Vox MP Santiago Abascal, December 2018.

7 Public declarations of PP Presidential Candidate in Ceuta, January 2019.

8 Pablo Casado, as stated during the campaign for the Andalusian elections in Granada, 24th November 2018.

9 Vox MP Rocío Monasterio, interview with *La Contra TV*, March 2018.

and parallel political organisations were, during the above-mentioned trial against the self-called Wolfpack, making a propagandistic effort to relativise the crime. The rhetorical battle was articulated as a confrontation between the supporters of a narrative based on a more or less consented »abuse« and those who wanted to label and identify the crime with the appropriate term »mass rape«. The victorious implementation of one concept or the other would change the whole narrative. Reactions of a Vox representative in Andalusia, who happens to be a retired judge, to the result of the trial are self-explaining: men are in danger. Even those who do not »perform well in bed will be denounced by unsatisfied women and go straight to jail«. ¹⁰ When a similar case occurred in Manresa – where a 17-years old girl was mass raped by five youngsters of Moroccan origin – the extreme-right immediately took advantage of the situation, building a discourse that resembles the narratives of the *Rassenschande* and the myth of the *Kulturzerstörer*, and asking for the comeback of death penalty. The body of the »national« women is often perceived by national-populism as an artefact that guarantees the survival of the nation, therefore objectified and associated with the common metaphor of »the nation is a body«. This perception of the nation as a harmonic body permits both the construction of a holistic community and unlocks a narrative that can be traced at least until the Spanish Civil War nationalist discourse, where republican fighters were categorised as »drunk rapists and barbarians« and women loyal to the government as »libertines and prostitutes«. Francoist legionaries committing war crimes were, in words of the same generals who are now praised and remembered by the extreme right: »true men showing women what is to be a real man«. According to this logic, patriots do not abuse women, patriots do not rape, foreigners and »otherised« enemies do. National men are »seducers«, migrants and political enemies are »rapists«. Migrants are not even humans but political artefacts, according to the president of the radical right-wing party:

»Open Arms [a Spanish NGO focused on Sea Rescue in the Mediterranean] is not an NGO, it is an operative base of the extreme left working in connivance with multinational corporations and banks. When they attack Italy, they attack, in reality, sovereignty, identity and harmony in Europe. Immigrants are their political merchandise. Nothing else.« ¹¹

Vox partisan rhetoric is articulated, as this example shows, through a strongly warfare-like dialectics in which dysphemism plays a central role. Rhetorical manipulation, political euphemisms immediately construct a new reality, in which veracity of facts seems to be, at least for the supporters of post-truth, completely irrelevant (Müller, 2017:113). Turning, by the simple fact of repetition of these selected disphemisms, human lives into »political merchandise« and gender crimes into »men who are maybe not treating women that well«, according to Casado's words, pursues the same goals underlined by Viktor Klemperer (1946) in his pioneer study of the »bureaucratic rhetoric« of the Third

10 Francisco Serrano Castro und José Riqueni Barrios, *Guía práctica para padres maltrados. Consejos para sobrevivir a la dictadura de género*, Córdoba, Almuzara, 2019.

11 Santiago Abascal on his Twitter account, 19th August 2018.

Reich.¹² Turning deportation in an act of »transport« followed the same objective as the »elimination of surpluses« stated by Spanish fascists as soon as they entered the city of Bilbao in 1937. The task of the »*Lingua Quarti Imperii*« (Griffin, 2014) used by the contemporary populist extreme right, in its attempt to objectify ethnical and political enemies, differs little from that of Klemperer's *LTI*. The discourse of *Vox* during the electoral campaign in Andalusia included the following terms associated with women who were not fitting under the radical worldview of the party: »radical transgenic pleasure-seeking feminists«, »psychopathic feminazis«, »totalitarian« »psychotic witches«, »ideological-burka-carriers« and a long list of similar hate-speech items. Simultaneously, the political discourse of the *Partido Popular* increased the use of certain terminology strictly »guerracivilista«, accompanying the political performances of Columbus square in February 2019, when the three right-wing parties marched together asking for new elections and labeling the social democratic government as »traitor«. Words such as »felon«, to be considered as marginal in Spanish politics since the comeback of democracy, returned to the first line of political communication. Many understood the selection of this term as a strategic decision: calling the actual president a »traitor to the fatherland« and a »*putschist*«, or elected politicians such as the former mayor of Madrid, Manuela Carmena »communist witch«, is not simply a resource to elevate the tension in the congress and to increase the polarisation of public opinion. It triggers powerful narratives deeply present in the shared memory of the Spanish society: the words of Casado and Abascal echoed those of right-wing extremists such as CEDA¹³ politician José María Gil Robles, who were using similar rhetorical arsenals to likewise label elected politicians and legitimate governments in 1936, calling for popular revolt, identifying traitors and perpetrators, and amongst them, women who forgot »where they belong«. Stimulating again the »ghost of the two Spains«, that of the »good Spaniards« and the »señoritas«, and that of their mortal enemies.

Progressive women were often typified as »too masculine«, »too independent«, »too powerful«, »vulgar« and promiscuous«, »authoritarian«, »cruel«, or simply »bad looking«. Women were presented, as the rhetorical arsenals of classic right-wing extremism and fascism show, as if a different matter composed them. Their bodies, as post-war literature production claims, were formed by a different substance, as »red« women were not cold – quoting Francoist writer Concha Espina (1941) – in situations in which »real ladies« would tremble. The rhetorical deployment of Francoism was attempting to achieve the same goals as the »*Lingua Quarti Imperii*« of contemporary extreme right: the vocabularies may have changed, but the programmatic objectives remain strictly the same.

Well-known reflections of Simone de Beauvoir (1949) seem to now acquire more significance during the rise of nationalism and its dichotomist worldviews: »Never forget that a political, economical or religious crisis will be enough to cast doubt on women's rights. These rights will never be vested. You'll have to stay vigilant your whole life.« It is our duty as democrats, as scholars and as feminists to keep these words in mind.

12 Victor Klemperer, *LTI Notizbuch eines Philologen*, (Kursiv) Berlin 1947.

13 The CEDA (Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas) was a Catholic conservative coalition founded in 1933 and dissolved during the Spanish Civil War in 1937.

Belinda Grace Gardner

Referring to themselves as the »conscience of the art world«, the Guerrilla Girls kicked off a poster campaign in 1985 entitled *Guerrilla Girls Talk Back* that expanded into a 30-piece portfolio. It was directed against art institutions, curators, art dealers, critics, and artists who they deemed to be actively engaged in, or passively sustaining a system of keeping women and non-*white* artists out of museum collections, gallery spaces, publications, and other venues of representation.¹

The feminist artist and activist group was initially formed as a response to the *International Survey of Painting and Sculpture* presented at the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1984. This exhibition featured works by 169 artists, of which less than ten percent were women. Shielding their individual identities behind their meanwhile emblematic gorilla costumes, the Guerrilla Girls launched a long-term performative, multi-media art project in the mid-1980' s that radically questioned the exclusion of women in the art world, with irony and a biting sense of humour and that is still going strong decades later.

One of the first posters in the portfolio, published in 1985, railed against well-known art critics of the day (some still active now) in bold letters: »THESE CRITICS DON'T WRITE ENOUGH ABOUT WOMEN ARTISTS.« Another poster published in 1986 was dedicated to the question: »WHICH ART MAG WAS WORST FOR WOMEN LAST YEAR?« According to the Guerrilla Girls, the latter category applied to *Flash Art* and *Artforum*, which only featured women artists in 13 to 16 percent of their articles between September 1985 and the summer of 1986.² Apart from prominent male writers, those listed also included female art critics, who themselves, of course, constituted – and, in fact, today still constitute – a minority in the upper echelons of art publishing.

Over a decade earlier, the feminist art critics Lucy Lippard (whose seminal book on conceptual art, *Six years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, was published in 1973) and Cindy Nemser (co-founder of the *Feminist Art Journal* in 1972 together with the artists Pat Mainardi and Irene Moss) were unsuccessfully pitching articles on little-known women artists to *Artforum* magazine. As stated on Nemser's website, the New York based *Feminist Art Journal* »sought to expose misogynist discrimination that dominated the arts and advocate for women artists both past and present.«³ The quarterly ran between 1972 and 1977, reaching a circulation of 8,000 with subscribers throughout the United States and other parts of the world. Unfortunately, this was not enough to enlighten a broader public. Despite the burgeoning feminist movement of the 1970s, the works of female artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Georgia O'Keefe were still being belittled as »emotional« or »soft«, and, in O'Keefe's case, as trivial in their incorporation

1 Cf. Guerrilla Girls' first press release, May 6, 1985: <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/projects> (last visit on 11 March, 2021).

2 Ibid.

3 Cf. website of Cindy Nemser: <https://www.cindynemser.com> (last visit on 11 March, 2021).

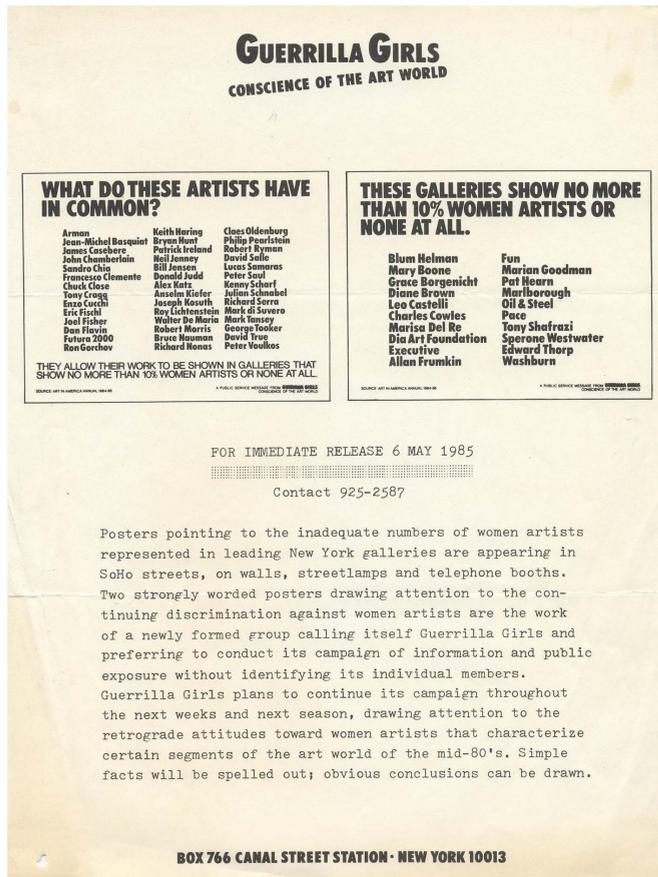


Fig. 9: Guerrilla Girls' first press release, May 6, 1985.

of »body parts«. The former assessment was voiced by famed Minimal artist Donald Judd, the latter by the influential critic, artist, and novelist Peter Plagens, who disparaged O'Keefe in one of his many articles for *Artforum*.⁴

Nemser's text, dedicated to »Stereotypes and Women Artists« and which was included in the first issue of the *Feminist Art Journal*, had earlier been discarded by the prominent editor of *Art in America*, Brian O'Doherty, author of the hugely popular book *Inside the White Cube* (1976). In an article entitled »Criticism: A Feminist Reckoning«, published in spring 2019, in an emancipation-wise more evolved *Art in America*, the author

4 Cf. Olivia Gauthier, »Criticism: A Feminist Reckoning«, in: *Art in America* (via www.artnews.com), April 1, 2019: <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/criticism-cindy-nemser-63624/> (last visit on 11 March, 2021).

Olivia Gauthier points out how, long before #MeToo, Nemser and other feminist activists were already calling out the exclusion and discrimination of women in the art world. Gauthier cites a letter from the late 1970s in which Nemser outlines the journal's ethos, stating: »We believe that art has the power to change people's thinking and their lives for the better and that, at this moment in history, women's art is moving quickly and forcefully in this direction.«⁵ Both Lucy Lippard and Cindy Nemser were driving forces in championing women's art production, breaking through, in their writing, the deeply entrenched chauvinist agenda of looking at and discussing art created by women. Still, it has taken decades, and arguably the vast circulation made possible by the emergence of the internet and online media, to trigger the major shift that we now see as a consequence of #MeToo.

For centuries, the male gaze has permeated all possible framings of women's art production and reflection, encompassing the exclusion of women from university programs and the pages of publications dedicated to the reception and discussion of art, right up to their banishment from the museum space, where the institutionalised rejection and systematic ignorance of female art production has manifested itself with particular blatancy. As Griselda Pollock – pioneer of feminist art history and author of the groundbreaking 1977 article »What's Wrong with Images of Women?« – noted in 1988, with regard to the lack of female presence in both art history and academia at large: »Women have not been omitted through forgetfulness or mere prejudice. The structural sexism of most academic disciplines contributes actively to the production and perpetuation of a gender hierarchy.«⁶ This omission reaches back through time and has become deeply ingrained in our culture.

Fast forward to the present: Since its inception in autumn of 2017, the #MeToo movement (the term is being used here synonymously with related initiatives such as »Time's Up«) has travelled from the abysses of Hollywood in the aftermath of the Weinstein scandal to other creative fields, also landing right in the misogynist heart of darkness that sets the pace in the art world. In this context, #MeToo has led to a dethronement and expulsion of male transgressors formerly in charge of art publications, galleries, and fairs, due to their harassment of women, extending from editors and curators to lenders, sponsors, and to artists themselves. Meanwhile, the movement – if it indeed turns out to be more than a short-lived moment in time – has also brought about a massive restructuring and re-coding of museum collections in its wake, as well as a reconsideration of art works created by women, their representation in the exhibition space, and their reception by the media and the public, reaching from the United States to Europe and other parts of the world. In the process, male artists who have defined western art history are being toppled from their pedestals and ejected, at least temporarily, from their predominant position(s).

5 Quoted after Gauthier, cf. *ibid.*

6 Cf. Griselda Pollock, »Feminist Interventions in Art's Histories«, abridged version of »Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art: An Introduction«, in: Pollock (ed.): *Vision and Difference. Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, London and New York 1988, publ. in: *Kritische Berichte - Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1988), p. 5.



The #MeToo Age: Power and Gender Equity in the Art World

Fig. 10: *The #MeToo Age: Power & Gender Equity in the Art World*, invitation to the discussion event, Feb. 21, 2018

On the Power 100 List 2018, annually compiled by the London-based magazine *ArtReview* and indicating the most influential current forces in the art world, #MeToo was awarded 3rd place for profoundly changing »the prevailing climate in which curators are appointed, prizes awarded and exhibitions framed.«⁷ Although one might rightly consider Power 100 Lists, or any type of list of this kind, generally somewhat dubious, in this case the assessment was appropriate. Indeed, #MeToo triggered a surprisingly swift and even dramatic shift in a state of affairs that was still in a slow-motion, or even in »no-motion« mode, when Lippard, Nemser, Pollock, and other critics addressed it in the 1970s; and that has only haltingly progressed since the Guerrilla Girls systematically began attacking it with their art activism in the mid-1980s. The #MeToo movement, which unquestionably has its problematic aspects of collective prejudice, over-zealousness, and lack of differentiation, has nevertheless induced a radical, and comparatively immediate reassessment, even a reckoning, with the hitherto male-controlled status quo in western society, politics, and culture, spanning national and institutional boundaries. In this sense #MeToo can be seen as an amplifier of already present voices that, through increased convergence and proliferation, are now finally being heard.

Meanwhile, male artists have become subjects of controversies, ranging from the well-documented demand for the removal of Balthus's sexualised painting of a young girl (*Thérèse Dreaming*, 1938) from presentation at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in late 2017; right up to a confrontation of art-historical giants such as Picasso or Gauguin for the sexist treatment of women evident in their works. This has cleared the way for a more universal reckoning with the male-defined history of art through the ages and through changing cultural contexts, bringing with it a denigration of its

7 In 2019, #MeToo dropped down to 21st place on the *ArtReview* Power 100 list, moving up again to 4th place on the list in 2020.: <https://artreview.com/artist/metoo/?year=2020> (last visit on 11.04.2021).

traditional male heroes and incunabula. While former aesthetic traditions and discourses are increasingly being challenged in the process of their feminist and post-colonial reassessment, the sexist, misogynist and racist subtexts, governing the art-historical narrative and its blatant lack of diversity, are being revealed, leading, in turn, to the necessity of re-evaluating and recontextualising the holdings of museums.

In the course of this overturning of male dominion in the art world in the wake of #MeToo, female artists are now, at long last given priority in the politics of institutional art presentation. As a case in point, London's Tate Britain highlighted contemporary British art from 1960 to the present for one year, starting in April 2019 with an extensive exhibition of 60 works by 30 female artists (no male artists were involved), including Susan Hiller, Sarah Lucas, Bridget Riley, and Monster Chetwynd. This renowned institution is working on expanding its holdings of women artists and also planning to more decisively and prominently showcase art created by women in the future. Tate Modern, in turn, had a head start in consciously and massively expanding the presence of women and non-European artists, particularly since Francis Morris became its first female director in 2016. In 2019, it dedicated major solo exhibitions to women artists, including the largest-ever UK survey of the Russian avant-garde trail-blazer Natalia Goncharova, followed by the first UK retrospective of the work of Dora Maar, hitherto known first and foremost as Picasso's muse and model. Lee Krasner, formerly outshone in her role as a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism by her husband Jackson Pollock, had a momentous retrospective at the Frankfurt Schirn Kunsthalle in autumn of 2019, succeeding a large exhibition at London's Barbican Center Art Gallery earlier that year. Meanwhile California-based painter Luchita Hurtado, born in 1920 in Venezuela, and the mother of internationally acclaimed artist Matt Mullican, held her first significant solo exhibition at Hauser & Wirth in New York City in early 2019, aged 98.

The trend to honour women artists in their later years, and oftentimes only belatedly, following their demise, has been going strong for a while now, including the relatively late international recognition of Louise Bourgeois and, more recently, the (re)discovery of the Romanian conceptual artist Geta Brătescu. As the first woman artist to be invited for presenting a solo exhibition in the Romanian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2017, Brătescu was already over 90 at the time of the show and died a year later, in 2018. On the one hand, the growing interest in formerly underrepresented women artists is a desirable phenomenon. And yet, on the other hand, it also conveys a sense of opportunism at a time when the works of women artists are becoming hot items and swiftly being usurped by the market.

Still, despite the dialectics that accompany #MeToo in this respect, the beneficial impact of the movement on the monetary appreciation of women's art production is not to be underestimated. This not only applies to more established female artists, such as Louise Bourgeois, Georgia O'Keefe, Agnes Martin, Joan Mitchell, and Yayoi Kusama, but also to representatives of younger generations such as Jenny Saville, who are currently being enthusiastically embraced by the market and whose works are fetching increasingly higher prices. Born in 1970 in Cambridge, England, Saville has recently risen to star



Fig. 11: Jenny Saville, *Propped*, 1992

status with her radically de-idealised monumental representations of female nudes. In the autumn of 2018, Saville's nude self-portrait *Propped* (1992) sold at Sotheby's London auction for a record-breaking price of 9.5 million pounds, or roughly 11 million euros, rendering her »the world's most expensive living female artist.«⁸

The substantial change in the institutional framing, and the reappraisal of art created by women, does not only affect the present-day situation; these shifts are also altering and widening readings of the art-historical past that are finally taking into account women whose contributions to the ever-expanding field of art have not yet been adequa-

8 Cf. Nate Freeman, »Jenny Saville Becomes Most Expensive Living Female Artist at £67.3 Million Sotheby's Sale«, *artsy.net*, Oct 5, 2018: arts <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-jenny-saville-expensive-living-female-artist-673-million-sothebys-sale> (last visit 11 March, 2021). In May 2020, Saville still held the record for »most expensive living female artist«, see: Elena Martinique, »Who Are The Most Successful Female Artists in Auction?«, on: *widewalls.ch*, Jan. 27, 2020: <https://www.widewalls.ch/most-successful-female-artists-in-auction/> (last visit 11 March, 2021).

tely perceived and acknowledged. However, this not only calls for the recognition of those artists who have been excluded from the art-historical narrative, but for a deconstruction of the very parameters upon which this narrative is based. As Griselda Pollock determined some decades ago: »Art history itself is to be understood as a series of representational practices which actively produce definitions of sexual difference and contribute to the present configuration of sexual politics and power relations. Art History is not just indifferent to women; it is a masculinist discourse, party to the social construction of sexual difference.«⁹

The »masculinist discourse«, which has prevailed for centuries, and still broadly defines art-historical frameworks today, determined as they are by »patriarchal logic, representation, history and justice«¹⁰, is in need of a rigorous dismantling and reformulation. This can only be achieved by way of new, comprehensive, multi-dimensional forms of analysing the previously disregarded art production of women and other marginalised groups, both in the past and in the present; i.e. an art criticism that goes beyond mere reaction and description, and that triggers a reinvention of the art-historical saga, while revealing the power structures that engendered this narrative and kept it going for so long. In its most radical consequence, this would lead to a re-writing of art history as an open narrative recording the consistent excellence and significance of those hitherto sidelined in the realm of art, while conceiving, in the words of the feminist scholar Peggy Phelan: »a language alert to the movement at the edge of the frame, across the hybrid border that marks the distinction between the visible and the invisible, the known and the unknown.«¹¹

Surely, the comprehensive questioning of the status quo should not result in museums being emptied of their collection holdings or the history of art being entirely depleted of its former (male) stars. The objective should rather be to heighten awareness of previous blind spots and to transcend ideological aesthetic framings that have too narrowly defined our (Western) concept of art for far too long. We might thus, finally, develop more richly textured, inclusive and expanded versions of the former narrative; versions that make visible, perhaps for the first time, the many overlooked and disregarded female art producers, who took action to forge change, long before the current moment, and who paved the way, with great courage and vigour, for current movements.

9 Cf. Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 11f.

10 Cf. Peggy Phelan, »Survey«, in: *Art & Feminism*, ed. by Helena Reckitt, London and New York 2001, p. 17.

11 *Ibid.*

Moderator Elke Buhr

Elke Buhr

First, I would like to come back to you Miguel. I'm just wondering, your formation is that of an art critic, so does that help you in any way in this kind of research, or is that something that doesn't have much to do with what you're doing now?

Miguel Venegas-Rivas

Yes, actually, it's very convenient because I'm not only working with ›lexical arsenals‹ (of the Spanish extreme right), I'm not only working with texts. I'm also working with visual communication, which is not part of what I wanted to present today, but it's part of this research that I am doing right now in relationship with a national populism – not only in the case of the extreme right, but also in the case of the so-called patriotic left, which is something that might sound a little bit new for some people here, but in the Basque country it has a long tradition.

So yes, I would say the second main part of my doing is to work specifically with images, which could be images in the social media or political posters, or what I call political performances. And in this case, logically, being an art historian is quite useful, because many political scientists, or many people working as political scientists, maybe do not have or do not often use the tools, the analytic tools that you can develop as an art historian or as a scholar working with political iconography.

Elke Buhr

And, thinking the other way around, if you look at the discussions that art critics have – e.g., about how political a work can be, or if it has to be more open – how do you feel about those discussions, coming from the political field? Do you think that art can do something with this problem of populism?

Miguel Venegas-Rivas

Of course, I'm pretty sure that art could and maybe should fight against populism, somehow building the necessary narratives to counter these nationalist tendencies.

Elke Buhr

So, Belinda, you also, in the end had an optimistic view about the agency of art criticism. It sounded as if you think that art criticism can really make some change. But how does this translate into your daily work? Do you consider feminist implications when you decide what you want to write about, whereas we cannot always even decide what we want to write about?

Belinda Grace Gardner

Indeed, as a freelance author, these decisions are not always in your own hands. I think I've become increasingly sensitive to how the narrative in the art world has been informed by a male-dominated discourse. A concrete example in this context is the title chosen for an exhibition in 2019 at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg, which was first shown in Stuttgart, called ›Die jungen Jahre der alten Meister‹ or ›The Young Years of the Old

Masters« referring to four big names in contemporary German art: Richter, Polke, Kiefer, and Baselitz. Referring to male artists as ›old masters« once again cemented this notion of the eternally celebrated male genius. Why is there a necessity, I wonder, to re-celebrate artists who are already firmly established on the market and have been so for many years with yet another exhibition focusing upon their earlier work? So yes, to answer your question, I am much more aware of these issues and of the fact that there is still a great need of debates and explorations regarding the art production by women and other marginalised groups at this point. As an art critic, I thus try to focus on opening up a more extensive and inclusive discussion of art in my writing.

Elke Buhr

I think an interesting fact is also that there have been so many discussions in the art world about feminism, and now we have the first biennials where there's 50% women and so on, and men are kind of getting defensive about the fear of being excluded that you also explained very well. So, one could think, well, women have already won the game. But then, when you look at the numbers, and also at the prices, they haven't. So, maybe this is my question to you, are we too naïve sometimes to think that feminism has already won so much?

Miguel Venegas-Rivas

Yes, very much. I mean, I think we have to remain optimistic but at the same time we have to be very conscious that we're facing again the comeback of this populist Zeitgeist, which also implies the comeback of this fear of the feminisation of society, which is at least, referring to the Spanish case, a discourse of ›the society becoming too feminine‹, whatever that means, according to these men. So, we're facing, because of this, some form of decline, some form of decadence. This is the discourse of the extreme right of the 30s I believe in Germany and in Italy.

The fact is that this discourse is coming back and the fact that this discourse is part of the discourse of the governments in many countries. I mean, we take a look around, we have people like Trump in power, we have Boris Johnson, we have Fidesz in Hungary, we have this Spanish extreme right growing pretty fast, we have Salvini which is right now not in government, but he's there, and the list continues. So yes, I don't know if it's about being naïve, but I think it's about thinking about fighting back against the return of this discourse. If it at any moment was marginal it is definitely not marginal anymore, because the extreme right is *de facto* back in power.

Belinda Grace Gardner

I totally agree with this. I think that #MeToo is also part of fighting back, in the case of the United States against the rise of right-wing politics with a president who is openly misogynist and racist. I think that Donald Trump's empowerment really triggered a larger movement. I hope that the current political moment and the right-wing surge will actually lead to a much more aggressive form of backlash through women and through other marginalised groups. This might even create the opportunity, also for art critics, to

become much more assertive in championing a rigorous resistance against retrograde cultural concepts and exclusions, including resistance against the usurpation of previously marginalised or unknown artists as a market commodity, which in capitalist societies quickly happens.

Elke Buhr

So, this is interesting because in a way it also contradicts what Kolja Reichert said earlier today (Panel 3) because he actually insists on talking about good and bad art, whatever that may be. But I think this is a discussion that will also go on tomorrow when we're talking about identity politics and censorship and questions like that.

Elke Buhr

I would like to open this to the public now.

Sabine Maria Schmidt

I have one question: Do you think that the #MeToo movement has arrived in Germany yet? I honestly have no idea of cases, of struggle, but you just said we should be more aggressive. Somehow I think it never arrived in Germany, and I heard that many people are a little bit astonished that we are not showing solidarity with such movements.

Elke Buhr

I do think that many methods of those activists are being copied and used, also by groups in Germany. I'm mentioning the group Sub Toujours in Berlin who are also acting in quite an aggressive manner. We've had cases of German curators that were kicked out of their jobs, not in Germany but in the States. So, I think we have been watching the American discussion and thinking we are taking part in it because we are so interested in it. But also, I don't really know any #MeToo case in Germany. I think the feminist movement is there. Do you know a case?

Sabine Maria Schmidt

Sorry, this is a very important difference. We are not talking about feminism in this case, just in the sense of the #MeToo movement, in a sense of sexual abuse and all this stuff. It was about quotes in exhibitions, so this is the feminist debate you mentioned. But I was wondering, it's amazing that we have in Germany no cases concerning #MeToo. It's just a question.

Jamie Kiesling, AICA USA

I want to ask a question about the limitations of contemporary feminism and gender identity-based political movements right now as you've framed them. And it's also a question about the limitations of liberal political imagination, in the face of right-wing populism gaining traction as well as in general.

So, for #MeToo specifically, many criticisms levelled against #MeToo were that it calls on women to identify on a level of victimhood. And I think this is something that

is also present in your presentation Miguel, in terms of how we're framing right-wing nationalist criticisms of law. Of course, they're correct insofar as all citizens should be equal in the eyes of the law. So, there is no coherent left argument to present that idea. So basically, my question is, in general, what is the limitation of this political imagination? That of #MeToo but also other contemporary feminisms? Particularly, I'm thinking, simultaneous with #MeToo in the United States there was an organisation of women workers at McDonald's who were consistently facing sexual harassment in their jobs, but that did not get a lot of press. So, if there's no kind of coherent organisation to create systems in which poor women can leave their marriages and their homes without the fear of destitution; if poor women cannot have children without the fear of destitution then what is #MeToo, what is feminism other than competition for access to the market?

Belinda Grace Gardner

That's an important point and a problem we face as being part of an art world scenario, which is *per se* to a certain degree already an elitist situation. Of course, #MeToo and other forms of activism, as well as writing about art, are not going to completely change deeply unjust social structures or emancipate an oppressive political system in its entirety. I think that's something we have to face when writing about art, which is definitely something that not everybody has access to and in itself reaches a rather exclusive circle, despite the fact that we are part of a global art world. I don't know how this can be solved. As an art critic, I try to address these issues specifically in the field of art, focusing on the inequality that has been rampant there for so many centuries. However, this is definitely just the tip of a very large iceberg that extends into all social and cultural spheres.

Sonia Recasens, critic and art creator based in Paris

I think here of Linda Nochlin. She said that the main goal of feminism in art is not the valorisation of old mistresses that we forgot but the deconstruction of the concept of artist as genius. Because it's a concept based on colonialism, on patriarchy, on imperialism, and on capitalism. So, for me, it's also important to have it in mind, and it's also maybe why we failed, for example during the 70s. Because then we had progress with women appearing on the artistic wall, they had exhibitions, but then the 80s arrived and they disappeared. This was the case for example in France. They had very strong exhibitions in art institutions in France, but the 80s arrived and we forgot them completely, and now we are in this movement of re-valorisation of the works.

But Lucy Lippard also said that, in the 70s, when she saw the biennial where there was 20% women, it's a 'glass ceiling' and so, if there is a second wave of feminism they have to fight to break this glass ceiling. And so she says if (if because some women artists seem to be satisfied with the situation) there is such a contradiction at that moment, between the idealism of a socialist art world and the ideal to sell work, to have the art world accessible for everybody, and also to have their own work in the market, there is a dilemma, there is a paradox in the movement. It was so in the 70s, but I think now that the old mistresses are bankable we have the same paradox and in the same dilemma, and it's crazy.