

Art Institutions and the Feminist Dialectic

Program Description

Art Institutions and the Feminist Dialectic aims to explore, through panel discussions, working groups, and a series of conversations, the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the exhibition, acquisition, and preservation of feminist artwork by looking back over the last thirty-five years in Ontario's public art gallery practice.

What feminist artwork has come into Ontario collections?

Both Museum London and the McIntosh Gallery are acquiring major pieces by Rae Davis and, in recent years, a number of Ontario public art galleries, including the National Gallery of Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Textile Museum of Canada, have mounted major exhibitions and acquired significant works of art that take up a feminist dialectic. Performative or performance-based works by Rebecca Belmore, Jana Sterbak, and Janet Cardiff have recently been chosen to represent Canada at the Venice Biennial, while Lisa Steele, Suzy Lake, and Colette Whiten are featured in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a major international exhibition of feminist art organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Given that artworks that arose from the activism and social consciousness of the late 1960s and that addressed civil rights, war protest, and feminism have been entering public art galleries and museums in recent years, a new discussion of how feminist work performs in the museum space is timely.

This two-day symposium will address issues, contradictions and paradoxes around the exhibition, acquisition, and preservation of feminist artwork by Ontario public art galleries.

The Symposium as Dialectic

In his essay "Philosophy and Art", G. W. F. Hegel explains that dialectic thought presupposes that everything contains its opposite and that human history develops out of constant contradiction.¹ For Hegel, the dialectic constitutes a process that progressively sharpens the theoretical paradigm by way of an oscillation, in which a proposition is followed by a counterproposition, creating a

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, "Philosophy and Art" in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 105

third theoretical space where the tension between opposing thoughts or constructs is negotiated and resolution becomes possible.

The Art Institution

In “The Art Museum as Ritual”, Carol Duncan writes that “to control the museum means precisely to control the representation of the community and its highest values and truths.... Those who are best prepared to perform its ritual—those who are most able to respond to its various cues—are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms.”²

Arguably, a shift has occurred, from the conception that art—and, by extension, the museum—is private and symbolic, to one that both are public, in which encounter and negotiation can occur and reflection on the societal exchanges between individual and state, viewer and artwork, private and public is encouraged.

The Feminist Critique

The expansion over the last decades of museum studies as its own field of study has led to a critical examination of the assumptions upon which the institution of the museum is built. Feminist scholars have extensively critiqued the gendered space of the museum, arguing that the institution is structured by a veiled system that suppresses the feminine.

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir situates woman’s consciousness in both the biological body and sociohistorical experience, explaining how deeply gendered modern society is and to what extent the category “woman” is a projection of male interests, fears, and fantasies.³ Using Marxian and Freudian methods, de Beauvoir analyses how women perform in the world. Often criticized for her essentialist notion of women as “lack”, de Beauvoir nonetheless opens up a theoretical discussion around the construction of gender hierarchy and normative aesthetics.

Carla Garnet
Toronto, December 2008

² Carol Duncan, “Maybe Feminism Has Just Begun” in M. Pachmanován, *Mobile Fidelities: Conversations on Feminism, History and Visuality*, n.paradoxa online, no. 19, May 2006, ISSN: 1462-0426, 127

³ Ibid., 127

Program of Activities (as confirmed)

Wednesday, December 3, 2008

9:00 am • Registration

9:15 am • Call to order and opening remarks by **Demetra Christakos**, Executive Director, Ontario Association of Art Galleries

9:30 am • **Carla Garnet** gives a brief review of the symposium proposal and introduces the keynote speaker, Dr. Christine Conley

10:00 am • Keynote address by **Dr. Christine Conley**, art historian and independent curator: **“Art Institutions, Theoretical Shifts and Oscillations: Which strategies work to affect new reading(s) of the public museum?”**

Dr. Christine Conley discusses the field of difference and ethics that feminism has opened on to—a move from the politics of feminine desire to the politics of making space for the desire of the other. All of this has implications for institutional policies, which in effect contributes to the making of meaning.

Dr. Christine Conley is an art historian and independent curator concerned with issues of gender, difference, trauma, and the art gallery as site of ethical encounters. Her MA thesis (Carleton) examined the status of women artists in Toronto during the 1960s, focusing on Christiane Pflug and Joyce Wieland, and her PhD (Essex) considered the reinvention of allegory by twentieth-century women artists Charlotte Salomon, Eva Hesse, and Mary Kelly as a means of symbolizing loss and imaging feminine subjectivities. Her postdoctoral work at Carleton pursued issues of trauma and affect in gallery installations. During the 1980s and '90s she curated a number of exhibitions in Alberta and Ontario focused on issues of feminist practice. In 2004 Dr. Conley curated a nationally touring exhibition of Canadian photo-artist Theodore Wan for the Dalhousie University Art Gallery and is presently working on a project with SAW Gallery, Ottawa that will bring together Aboriginal performance artists with artists based in Belfast. She lectures in art history at the University of Ottawa.

Publications include: “Daughter in Exile: the painting space of Christiane Pflug” in *RACAR* (1998); “The Gendering of Allegory: Mary Kelly’s *Post-Partum Document* and Benjamin’s Melancholy Dialectics” in *Differential Aesthetics: Art practices and philosophies. Towards new feminist understandings* (Ashgate 2000); “True Patriot Love: Joyce Wieland’s Canada” in *Art, Nation and Gender: Ethnic Landscapes, Myths and Mother-figures* (Ashgate 2003); “May Chan: Coming Into Her Own” in *Caught in the Act: an Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian*

Women (YYZ 2004); and “Memory and *Trauerspiel*: Charlotte Salomon’s *Life? or Theatre?* and Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History” in *Charlotte Salomon: Gender, Trauma and Creativity* (Cornell 2006).

Forthcoming publications include: “Material Matters: Affect and Ethics in Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art”, *After Bad Taste: Contemporary Atrocious Art and its Critical Repulsions* (Tate Liverpool); “Theodore Wan and the Subject of Medical Illustration”, *RACAR*; and “Morning Cleaning: Jeff Wall and the Large Glass”, *Art History* (2010).

11:00 am • Coffee

11:15 am • **Working Groups: Three Questions:**

- **How is the art museum a gendered space?**
- **How does feminist work affect new reading(s) of the public museum?**
- **What strategies have art curators developed for the presentation, housing, and maintenance of feminist art?**

Rosalind Krauss uses the term “discursive horizon” to describe the ordering effected on artworks entering a field already structured by other works and their interpretations. Griselda Pollock has described this field as gendered by myths, values, assumptions, silences, and prejudices that underlie the institutional inscription of artistic subjects and works not only in terms of the politics of inclusion and exclusion, but in terms of the hierarchical systems of classification that mandate exclusion, and of the monopolies on definitions of legitimate culture and cultural legitimacy that empower exclusion.—CG

12:30 pm • LUNCH

1:15 pm • Art Gallery of Peterborough curator **Pamela Edmonds** presents “**B(l)ack To The Drawing Board: Re(Envisioning) Art, Identity Politics and African-Canadian Feminisms**”

and

Johanna Householder, performance artist and art theorist, presents “**Histories of performance and the body, re-performance, and the effect that performance has had in contemporary art and new media**”

Both in their presentations and then in their subsequent conversation, curator and artist address the question: How does the art institution re-enact performance work in future time and space? In addition, they examine the challenges and opportunities that performance-based work

presents to the public art institution and explore strategies for the presentation, housing, and maintenance of feminist art.

*Dena Shottenkirk writes, "Conceptual art of the 1960s, while much revered, is not very often looked at. Younger artists know the names and reputations of this generation, but have little close experience with the work itself. This is particularly odd since much work that is currently being made refers back to conceptual sources.... Artists like Pippilotti Rist, among many more, cannot be understood without the language of conceptual art."*⁴

As noted earlier, artworks informed by the activism and social consciousness of the late 1960s have been flowing into public art galleries and museums recently, making a new discussion of how feminist work performs in the museum space timely. —CG

Pamela Edmonds is a visual and media arts curator originally from Montreal, Quebec. She received her BFA and an MA in Art History from Concordia University. The former co-editor of the Black cultural journal *Kola* (based in Montreal), she is interested in developing and curating projects that focus on the creative production of African-Canadian artists and in work that deals with issues surrounding the ideologies of race, gender, cultural identity, and representation. She is the former Program Coordinator of A Space Gallery (Toronto) and currently works as Curator at the Art Gallery of Peterborough. Edmonds' curatorial projects include: *Passages...Lucie Chan and Sheila Butler*, Art Gallery of Peterborough (2007); *Re-Mix: Dawit Petros*, Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Toronto (2006); *Black Body: Race, Resistance, Response*, Montreal, arts interculturels (MAI), Montreal, (2003); *Africadian Visions: Contemporary Film From Black Nova Scotia*, Winnipeg Cinematheque (2001); *SisterVisions III: Through Our Eyes* at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax (2000); and *Generations and Feminisms*, SAW Gallery, Ottawa, (1999).

Johanna Householder has been making performances and other artwork in Canada since the late 1970s. She was a member of the satirical feminist performance ensemble The Clichettes, who performed under variable circumstances throughout the 1980s. While The Clichettes practiced their own brand of pop culture detournement, Householder has maintained a unique performance practice, often collaborating with other artists. She is one of the founders of the 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, which just held its seventh biannual, presenting artists from seventeen countries. Her short video works, produced in collaboration with b. h. Yael, have screened internationally. She is a professor in the Integrated Media Program at the Ontario College of Art and Design. With Tanya Mars, she edited *Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance by Canadian Women*, published by YYZ Books in 2004.

⁴ Dena Shottenkirk, *C International Contemporary Art*, Spring 2002 issue, C15.

2:45 pm • Coffee

3:00 pm • **Dr. Kristina Huneault**, Concordia University Research Chair in the Department of Art History presents ***“Practice and Method in the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative”***

Griselda Pollock argues from her earliest writings forward about the exclusion of women artists from the canon, but problematizes the attempt to insert women’s work into a static *a priori* concept of art history as an exercise in futility; rather, the production of a *feminist* art history, she claims, is the task at hand. More recently, Cornelia Butler writes, “The impact of feminist art has yet to be fully theorized and accepted by academic and museum institutions.”⁵

Given that the art institution’s mandate has never been simply to rescue women artists from oblivion—such a project fails to get to the root of “art history” as a construct—the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative Inaugural Conference, along with other projects in development such as an artist database to assist scholars researching Canadian women artists and a collaborative initiative with the National Gallery of Canada and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to digitize catalogues and exhibition reviews, are more than compelling projects because they engage in “actively looking for ways to encourage collaboration and exchange amongst scholars working on women and art in Canada.”⁶—CG

Dr. Kristina Huneault is Associate Professor in the Art History department at Concordia University, where she occupies a University Research Chair. Together with Janice Anderson and Melinda Reinhart, she is one of the founders of the Canadian Women Artists History Initiative, a project that aims to bring researchers and resources together to foster the study of art made by women in Canada prior to 1967. Dr. Huneault’s research brings socially and philosophically grounded approaches to art together in order to consider how visual images participate in the construction of subjectivity. How does art participate in our understanding of the self in relation to others? Her first book, *Difficult Subjects: Working Women and Visual Culture, Britain 1880–1914* (Ashgate, 2002), asks this question in relation to images of women and work. In her current research she is exploring the visible traces of gendered subjectivity in painting by historical Canadian women. Published work on Helen McNicoll (2004), Frances Anne Hopkins (2005), and miniature painting (2007) has been funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Le Fonds

⁵ Cornelia Butler, “Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria”, in *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007) 15.

⁶ Canadian Women Artists History Initiative Inaugural Conference, October 2 to 4, 2008, organized by Concordia University in Montreal. <http://cwahi.concordia.ca/activities/>

québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC), and relates to her next monograph, *Presence Through Absence: Subjectivity and Art by Women in Canada*. Other published writings include articles on the public display of working women in sweated industries exhibitions (2000), images of flower sellers in Victorian culture (1998), women in British trade union imagery (1996), and the war sculptures of Canadian artists Frances Loring and Florence Wyle (1994).

4:00 pm • Working Groups: Three Questions:

- **What challenges and opportunities does performance-based work present to the public art institution?**
- **Can the art museum successfully re-enact performance-based work?**
- **What do the public institutions hope to gain from a conversation with artists about works made as activism?**

In writing about Cindy Sherman's Old Masters work, Rosalind Krauss brings forward the notion of forming and forming again relationships between mind and body.⁷ Krauss posits masquerade as a psychoanalytic term that she also contends is a phenomenon which all woman submit to, both inside and outside of representation.⁸ The form (or formlessness) of performance work itself forces the art institution to consider issues around creating spaces to present it, disseminate information about it, house it, and maintain it. —CG

5:00 pm • Adjournal

6:00 pm • AGO tour (optional)

8:30 pm • Dinner and drinks at the Queen Mother Café, 208 Queen Street West. (Please note that dinner is not included in the price of the symposium.)

⁷ Rosalind Krauss, *Bachelors* (Cambridge: October Books/MIT Press, 1999) 147

⁸ *Ibid.*, 114–115

Thursday, December 4, 2008

10:00 am • Art Gallery of Ontario Assistant Curator of Photography Sophie Hackett and artist **Suzy Lake** present “**Becoming and Self-knowing in Self Imaging: Can Exhibition Enact Identity and What It Feels Like to Be Put on Display?**”

In their presentation and subsequent dialogue, Sophie Hackett and Suzy Lake take up the notion of extending the performative quality of a work through collaborative and innovative exhibition practice.

In 1974's Speculum of the Other Woman, the French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray conflated several contested notions into a single term: la mysterique. In doing so, Irigaray showed that sorcery, hysteria, mystery, and femininity are imbricated in representations of “woman” that have appeared in texts from Plato to Lacan. Rather than exorcise the mysterique concept, Irigaray took the symbol of potentially subversive feminine productivity to be excellent. If, Irigaray argued, women had been historically left out of text and images created by and for men, one cure could be enacted by feminine hysteria, which induces the compulsion to mime, creating an opportunity to mirror with a predetermined representation of one's own subjectivity.⁹—CG

Sophie Hackett is the Assistant Curator, Photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario. She holds a Master of Arts from the University of Chicago, with a focus on the History of Photography, and spent a year in the Department of Photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles in 2005–2006. She also teaches in Ryerson University's Masters program in Photographic Preservation and Collections Management. Over the last decade, she has contributed to several Canadian art magazines and curated many shows independently, including *The Found and the Familiar: Snapshots in Contemporary Canadian Art*, co-curated with Jennifer Long, which toured nationally. Her research interests include: modernism and formulations of the history of photography; fashion and advertising photography; vernacular photography and studio portrait photography. To these subjects, she brings her training as an artist and a particular attention to the challenge that photography, in all its forms, presents to the museum context and to art history in general. In her role at the Art Gallery of Ontario, she has participated centrally in the new installation of photographic works from the permanent collection, a thematic presentation that reflects the many ways that photographs engage daily life, memory, history, and knowledge. For CONTACT 2008, she worked with Toronto artist Suzy Lake on *In Rhythm of a True Space*, to create a site-specific installation on the construction hoarding of the Art Gallery of Ontario.

⁹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 133

Suzy Lake was born in Detroit, Michigan in 1947. Following the 1967 Detroit riots she immigrated to Montreal. Influenced by social and political involvement concurrent to the early conceptual period, she is known for her large-scale photography dealing with the body as both her subject and/or her device. In her current work, Lake continues to use references to the body as a means to investigate notions of beauty in the context of pop and consumer culture. In a 1993 retrospective catalogue, Martha Hanna responds to her feminist politicization: "Although she has not overtly addressed feminist issues, the politics of feminism is an undercurrent in all her major photographic works to date. The attention to power relations that feminism implies may be seen in Lake's work as symbolic of gender struggle and her artwork is evidence of her progress". Lake was one of a group of artists that in the early 1970s adopted performance, video, and photography in order to explore the politics of gender, the body, and identity. Early examples of her work are included in the touring exhibition: *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution 1965–1980*, curated by Connie Butler and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. In April of 2007, her work was featured in *Identity Theft* with Eleanor Antin and Lynn Hershman at the Santa Monica Museum of Art. Lake has a long exhibition career in Canada and has also shown her work in Europe, the United States, South America, and Asia. She is represented by Paul Petro Contemporary Art (Toronto) and SolwayJones (Los Angeles).

Sophie Hackett and **Suzy Lake** recently worked together on *In Rhythm of a True Space*, a site-specific installation curated by Hackett for the Art Gallery of Ontario in collaboration with CONTACT, in which Lake revisits a 1997 photographic concept in response to the museum's transformation, in its last months of construction.

11:00 am • Working Groups: Completing and formalizing reports for ten-minute presentations.

noon • LUNCH

1:00 pm • Emelie Chhangur, Assistant Director/Curator at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU), presents "**Concrete Curating – no. it is opposition.**"

Emelie Chhangur takes up an analysis of the curator's role as the intermediary between artwork and its audience in her current show, on view now at the AGYU, entitled *Carla Zaccagnini – no. it is opposition*. In her presentation, Chhangur addresses the question of how the curating of art contributes to a diagnosis of culture and discusses what new curatorial strategies are emerging as a result of the fold now occurring between local and international discourse and exhibition practice.

*In Bachelors, Rosalind Krauss reads the work of nine modern women artists, including Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, Dora Maar, and Louise Bourgeois, through a feminist lens, contesting the masculinist aesthetics of modern art criticism. Krauss points out that the parallel between Cahun and Duchamp, alias Rose Selavy, goes beyond the names and into the whole project of self-marking as the key exploration which incorporates a fold in the field of representation, a fold around which not only identities revolve and reflect like a pair of double helixes but also the positions of the viewer and viewed become reversible, the parallel becomes all the more compelling.*¹⁰

Chhangur writes, “The palindromic title of the exhibition title, no. it is opposition, hints at its central focus—what artist Zaccagnini describes as ‘forking paths and crossroads.’ The exhibited works are premised on replication but ultimately prove to be different (forking paths) or appear completely disparate but ultimately end in the same place (crossroads), while the exhibition plan repeats itself with a full-scale replica of the AGYU lobby that acts as a frame for the works included in the exhibition.”¹¹—CG

Emelie Chhangur is a Toronto-based artist, cultural worker, and curator. Maintaining a process-based, collaborative approach to working with artists, her recent curatorial research and practice finds its relevant context in Latin America. As an artist, her position as Assistant Director/Curator at the Art Gallery of York University (AGYU) is instrumental in transforming the nature of the contemporary art institution and the role of the university art gallery in relation to its academic context and its social function within an arts community. Her single-channel videos have been shown nationally and internationally and her sculpture/installation work was most recently shown in *Dyed Roots: The new emergence of Culture* at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA) in Toronto.

2:00 pm • Working Groups Report

3:15 pm • Coffee

3:30 pm • Camilla Singh, Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art curator, presents “**A Brief History of a Contemporary Canadian Art Curator**” and

Dr. Allyson Mitchell, visual artist, curator, and educator, presents: “**Deep Lez**”

In their presentations and subsequent conversation, Camilla Singh and Allyson Mitchell, both actively involved in making exhibitions that comprise work navigating the complexities of identity in an increasingly

¹⁰ Krauss, *Bachelors* 42-47

¹¹ <http://www.yorku.ca/agyu/index2.html>

globalized contemporary art world, address the issue of whether or not institutional acquisition of newly historical feminist artwork extends to women artists the right to be seen as both maker and bearer of meaning.

Linda Nochlin argues that “there is no point in asking how relevant feminism is to art practice, history, and criticism today, since feminist consciousness is pervasive even when unacknowledged or demeaned. Feminism is not only overtly present but has over the past thirty years irrevocably changed the way we think about art, the body, the relationship between the viewer and the artwork, and the standing of the various media.”¹² That stated, as an intellectual and political revolution, feminism differs from previous epistemological transformations because it refuses to be “merely” an intellectual matter. —CG

Camilla Singh is a visual artist and curator, working in Toronto and exhibiting internationally. She is the curator at the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art (MOCCA), where she has been working since 2002. She arrived at MOCCA with an intensive background of orchestrating contemporary art projects after receiving an MFA from the Dutch Art Institute in the Netherlands. Her curatorial projects at MOCCA have often featured live areas hosting performances, concerts, and sites of change within the gallery exhibition space. Recently, as curator of Toronto’s Nuit Blanche (Zone C) in 2007, she presented *Supernatural City*, consisting of ten major outdoor contemporary art installations, viewed by 800,000 people over the course of twelve hours, from dusk to dawn.

Singh is an active member and cofounder of the New Remote art collective, a group of artists from Canada, the Netherlands, and Serbia, that travels the world by invitation to produce spontaneous, site-specific installations. New Remote projects employ simple communication technologies to connect with geographically remote collaborators. The outcome of these works is often charged with the politics, culture, and social conventions of the sites in which they are produced.

Allyson Mitchell is a maximalist artist working predominantly in sculpture, installation, and film. Since 1997, Mitchell has been melding feminism and pop culture to play with contemporary ideas about sexuality, autobiography, and the body, largely through the use of reclaimed domestic materials and abandoned craft. Her work has exhibited in galleries and festivals across Canada, the US, Europe, and East Asia. She has also performed extensively with Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, a fat performance troupe, as well as publishing both writing and music. She teaches at York University in the School of Women's Studies. Allyson Mitchell's film, performance, and installation work is currently touring Canada and the US. In 2009–2010 her exhibition *Ladies Sasquatch* will travel from McMaster Museum of Art to the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Lethbridge University Art Gallery,

¹² Dena Shottenkirk, *C International Contemporary Art*, Spring 2002 issue, C15.

and the Art Gallery of Peterborough. Currently, Mitchell is curating a survey exhibition of Judy Chicago's textile-based work, from 1968 to 2008, for the Textile Museum of Canada (opening February 2009).

5:00 pm • Adjournment and thanks.

Carla Garnet is a Toronto-based curator, best known for initiating the Garnet Press Gallery Project, active from 1984–1997, on the heels of producing *ChromaLiving* with Andy Fabo and Tim Jocelyn. In recent years, Garnet has continued to work as an independent curator, actively supporting contemporary culture through a variety of initiatives that aim to interrogate the politics of aesthetics. Garnet's interest in collaboration has led to a number of joint projects, including *Breath Taking* (2001) at TPW and Winnipeg's Floating Gallery, co-curated with Sharon Switzer; *Fair Cruelty* (2005) at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery, co-curated with Andrew Harwood; and *18 Illuminations: Contemporary Artists and Light* (2005), presented by the Tom Thomson Art Gallery and travelling to six museums across Canada, co-curated with Corinna Ghaznavi. Recently, Garnet has curated *Sharon Switzer: Falling from Grace*, on view at the McMaster Museum of Art in 2006–07, and Allyson Mitchell's *Ladies Sasquatch Gathering*, launching at McMaster in 2009 and travelling to the Art Gallery of Winnipeg, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Peterborough. Currently, Garnet is completing her Masters in Art History at York University and developing a touring exhibition of Suzy Lake's photo-based work with Matthew Brower, curator at the University of Toronto Art Centre. Garnet has contributed to *Canadian Art*, *C magazine*, and *MIX* magazines, in addition to numerous exhibition publications.