

The Languages of All-Women Exhibitions

“I am still struck by the psychological displacement of women who are alienated by and in language.”¹

Lucy R. Lippard

All-women shows have been markedly in vogue in the past few years.² Under various curatorial frameworks, these—often-exhaustive—gendered shows always have one thing in common: women. As a woman myself, I often feel sheepish about questioning the structures around these exhibitions as it is well documented that women are underrepresented in the art world, and in need of exposure and support. Still, I bend toward suspicion when galleries and institutions tout an all-women roster. Frustratingly, many of these exhibitions can feel revisionist, or worse, imply a capitalization on the trending socio-political resurgence of women’s rights, or the threat to them in our current politics. There are certainly broad problematics within the all-women structure worthy of discussion—the capitalization on the real struggles of women; the masking of uneven gallery rosters that show predominately men; the trend of showing late-career or deceased women artists; the dual demonization and romanticization of motherhood within the biographies of woman artists; and the lack of sustained institutional support for women artists working today. But, I’d like to focus

here specifically on the *languages* of all-women exhibitions.

First we must consider how language—in the form of show titles, press releases, promotional materials, and general aura—spawns prejudice before anyone even walks through the front door. Like the joke about vegans: How do you know if an exhibition will include only women? It will tell you. And it often tells you loudly, and in advance. In a 2016 *Atlantic* article, Sarah Boxer described visiting *Women of Abstract Expressionism* at the Denver Art Museum: “I could see banners announcing the women’s exhibition from a distance. WOMEN WOMEN WOMEN. It almost looked like they were announcing a strip tease.” As Boxer walked closer, a miniscule text that read “women of abstract expressionism” could be seen in small type, low on the banner. Boxer also recalls the cover for the catalogue of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*—the massive all-women exhibition at MOCA in 2007—which features Martha Rosler’s clippings of naked women from *Playboy*, “as if to announce, ‘sexy ladies inside!’”³ While the Rosler work was exhibited in *WACK!*, choosing that particular work for the catalogue image problematically gave primacy to the fetishization of the nude female, if even while being subversive.

The recent exhibition *CUNT* at Venus Over Los Angeles chose a more subtle promotional tack, its title notwithstanding: a square baby-pink poster with the exhibition title centered, all caps, in white. While understated, the graphic recalls normative baby-girl colors as well as the anatomy of female genitalia. While the exhibition featured fantastic work, that poster (and the brashness of the word *cunt*) infected any pure

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Dearest Art Collector,
It has come to our
attention that your
collection, like most,
does not contain
enough art by women
We know that you
feel terrible about this
and will rectify the
situation immediately
All our love,
Guerrilla Girls

www.guerrillagirls.com

experience of the work apart from its association to female genitalia. There are certainly many convincing arguments towards reclaiming and normalizing the word cunt⁴—students in early feminist programs were instructed to repeat the word cunt until it was removed of its derogatory associations.⁵ Still, utilizing it as a moniker for a group show by women shrouds the work included under the complicated social and linguistic baggage that the word carries.

In the *WACK!* catalogue, Eva Hesse's incomparable work *Hang Up* (1966) is organized under the heading "Gendered Space" though historically this work has been associated with minimalism, not feminism. This reframing of context recalls the way in which Ana Mendieta's work has been adopted by various feminist groups and causes over the years, while Mendieta herself was "dissatisfied with being reduced to one vision of feminism, or one articulation of identity."⁶ For instance, white feminist groups looped her work in with the representation of The Goddess, "a trendy subtopic" of the era, although Mendieta's relationship to goddesses was more "complex and volatile."⁷ Her work was also contextualized within restricting feminist dialogues of the body, victimhood, and violence. This type of singularity was precisely what Mendieta's work was meant to reject, and these misrepresentations ultimately led to her resignation from the feminist group A.I.R. in 1982.⁸ Charles Merewether explains, "the question of naming has afflicted the scholarship and reception of Ana Mendieta's work."⁹ It is indeed this question of naming that is paramount in the re-historicization of women artists today, as it shapes the future narrative of their historically tenuous careers.

Often all-women exhibitions include the qualifier, *woman*, almost as a sort of warning of what can be expected of the work. In researching this article, I reached out to Micol Hebron, who has been actively tracking gender inequality on gallery rosters since 2013. "I think the more complicated and perhaps insidious reason that this is a problem is the longstanding inherent bias against women's work," Hebron wrote to me in a recent email. "Women's labor(s) are historically valued less: their wages are lower, their art sells for less, and the aesthetics associated with 'women's work' are considered less cool. So, an all-women show can be seen as a concession of sorts."

When curators and gallerists preface exhibitions with an admission of the artist's gender, it makes the fact impossible to ignore and surely has an effect on the way in which the artist's work is being viewed. A wonderful exhibition at the Landing gallery last summer, which included stunning works by Tanya Aguiñiga, Loie Hollowell, Lenore Tawney, was titled dryly—and reductively—*3 Women*. The title was lifted from a 1977 Robert Altman film, yet dropped on this context of three intergenerational artists, it became a descriptor, a confession. Under this titling, the indomitable weavings of Tawney, who worked alongside Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly in the '60s, seemed to sink into categories of "women's work," while Loie Hollowell's expansive and intricate paintings read more explicitly like pretty little vaginas.

We never hear an exhibition described as an all-men exhibition, since it is the understood normal. As such, as we constantly denote *woman*, we are reinforcing men as the engrained default. In her introduction to *The Pink Glass Swan*, the feminist art

1. Lucy Lippard, "Introduction: Moving Targets/ Concentric Circles: Notes from the Radical Whirlwind," *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Feminist Essays on Art*, (New York: The New Press, 1995).

2. *Revolution in the Making: Abstract Sculpture by Women, 1947–2016* at Hauser & Wirth, *Escape*

Attempts at Shulamit Nazrian, *SOTGFO* at Ghebaly Gallery, *Power* at SPRÜTH MAGERS, *Signifying Form* at the Landing, *CUNT* at Venus Over Los Angeles, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985* at The Hammer, and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* at The California African American Museum come to mind as notable examples in Los Angeles in the last year.



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Ana Mendieta, *Siluetas Works in Mexico* (1973-1977). Color photograph, 19 1/4 x 12 7/8 inches. The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles Purchased with a grant provided by The Judith Rothschild Foundation.
© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC. Image courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

critic Lucy Lippard describes working on her own writing and constantly referring to “the critic” as *he*, “as though my own identity and actions had been subsumed by patriarchal nomenclature.”¹⁰ As we incessantly insert women back into art history, we in turn agree with the normative patriarchal telling of history that tells us that women need inserting—while, as Griselda Pollock insisted, “feminist history began inside art history.”¹¹ As we continue to group women together in exhibitions, and insist on qualifying the exhibition as belonging to women, we keep women on the outside of mainstream art. As my editor Aaron Horst commented in a recent conversation, “it makes the fact of being a woman *and* an artist somehow remarkable.” Famously, when asked at a party “what women artists think,” Joan Mitchell turned to Elaine De Kooning, exclaiming, “Elaine, let’s get the hell out of here.”¹²

Perhaps to combat these musty normatives of art-history, curators of all-women exhibitions slap on language that *opposes weakness: power, revolution, radical, escape, get the fuck out, wack!* This combativeness often feels put on, as if we must insist and argue that women might be able to wield power. Though not specifically an all-women exhibition, in reference to the titling of *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* (a recent group exhibition of mostly LGBTQ-identified artists at the New Museum), Peter Schjeldahl wrote “the four nouns in the title of the [show] go off like improvised explosive devices, boding civil strife.” A beat later, Schjeldahl concedes that the works in the exhibition don’t live up to its corraling and boosterish nomenclature. “The show’s provocative title turns out to function rather like the old vaudeville pistol that emits a little flag imprinted ‘BANG.’”¹³ This sort of

blanket categorical re-contextualization that the exhibition titling imbues is precisely problematic as it limits—or makes difficult—a reading of the artwork under any other conceptual framework.

In reference to the titling of *SOGTFO (Sculpture or Get the Fuck Out)*, a five-woman sculpture exhibition at Ghebaly Gallery, Jonathan Griffin wrote, “Even subverted, its aggressive tone seems unfitting for the general measured output of these five artists. None are polemical about their gender, and it’s hard to imagine any of them coming up with a title as caustic as *SOGTFO*—which, of course, they didn’t.”¹⁴ While it is potentially the case that women artists are consulted and collaborated with in the development of exhibition titles (as in fact was the case with *CUNT*);¹⁵ elsewhere the titling is meant to evoke struggle and combat that isn’t inherent in the work itself. In the case of titling *WACK!*, Connie Butler explains that “the exclamatory title of the exhibition is intended to recall the bold idealism that characterized the feminist movement during [the late ’60s and ’70s]... The violent and sexual connotations of *WACK* serve to reinforce feminism’s affront to the patriarchal system.”¹⁶ These abrasive nomenclatures seem to perpetuate the stereotype of the brash and wild feminist, while also reeking of self-congratulatory prose, suggesting that the institution who undoubtedly titled said exhibition has rediscovered—and tamed?—a wild bunch of feminists.

Though, to a large extent, many women in these monstrous exhibitions do not consider their work feminist at all (and some decline participation). It is an arduous task to clarify the difference between a feminist framework and actual feminist art,¹⁷ and the all-women context “allow[s] for some

3. Sarah Boxer, “An Era for Women Artists?,” *The Atlantic*, December 2016.

4. The etymology of the word cunt relates to the celebration of the feminine and the goddess, where its sister-word, vagina, has more violent and aggressive root word connotations, translating to sheath or scabbard in which to thrust a sword. Gillian Schutte, “C is for Cunt,” *Ms. Magazine* (blog), November 27, 2012, <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/11/27/c-is-for-cunt/>.

form of erasure or fitting women into existing parameters.”¹⁸

The way in which we are speaking, writing, and naming all-women exhibitions seems paramount to the ways in which the next generation will understand the contributions of women artists. As Helen Molesworth has said, “the only way to get diversity is to actually do it.”¹⁹ It is this *doing* that can get complicated as institutions constantly point to diversity they are implementing—*look ma, no hands!*—with promotional language and curatorial strategies. Language instills pattern; pattern becomes habit. “The habits of mind that our culture has instilled in us from infancy shape our orientation to the world and our emotional responses to the objects we encounter,” wrote Guy Deutscher in a *Times* article about how language shapes reality. “They may also have a marked impact on our beliefs, values and ideologies.”²⁰ As such, all-women exhibitions may have the power to accelerate or neuter efforts towards the equalization of gender biases in the arts. And much of this power comes down to the naming; the language that garnishes press releases and show cards may in fact be reinforcing our ingrained biases rather than liberating us from them.

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5. Mira Schor, “The ism That Dare Not Speak its Name,” in *A Decade of Negative Thinking* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 30.

6. Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Against the Body: Interpreting Ana Mendieta,” *Ana Mendieta: Traces* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 35.

7. *Ibid.*, 31.

8. *Ibid.*, 134-135.

9. Charles Merewether, “From Inception to Dissolution: An Essay on Expenditure in the work of Ana Mendieta,” *Ana Mendieta* (Poligrapha, 1998), 148.

10. Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan*, 13.

11. Griselda Pollock, “Feminist Interventions in Art’s Histories,” *Kritische Berichte*, 16, No. 1 (1998).

12. Boxer.

13. Peter Schjeldahl, “Safe Space: A Show on Gender Soothes More than it Unsettles,” *The New Yorker*, October 9, 2017.

14. Jonathan Griffin, “SOGTFO at Francois Ghebaly,” *Carla*, issue 1, April 2015.

15. Carla Podcast, Episode 1, October 2017. <http://contemporaryartreview.la/episode-1/>.

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

17. Cecillia Fajardo-Hill, “The invisibility of Latin American Women Artists: Problematizing Art Historical and Curatorial Practices,” *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985* (Munich, London, New York: Prestel, 2017), 23-24.

18. *Ibid.*, 21.

19. Boxer.

20. Guy Deitsher, “Does Your Language Shape How You Think?,” *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 26, 2010.



3

Marilyn Minter, *Twenty Sixteen*
(2017). Dye sublimation print,
40 × 30 inches. Edition 2 of 5 +
2 AP. Image courtesy the artist
and VENUS, Los Angeles.



4

Judith Bernstein, *Vertical #1* (2014).
Charcoal on linen, 180 × 84 inches.
Image courtesy the artist and VENUS,
Los Angeles.