

Danger! Women reading

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Throughout modern history the figure of the woman reader has been perceived as potentially subversive or dangerous, 'a threat to domestic order' (Long, 2004). She's a thrillingly ambiguous figure whose piety and/or rebelliousness has captured the attention of numerous artists over centuries (Bollmann 2016). The significance of women's periodical culture within first- and second-wave struggles has been addressed by literary theorists (Bazin and Waters ed., 2017), as have the histories of reading groups (Long 2004), independent bookshops (Delap 2016) and feminist publishers (Murray 2000) – and yet, despite reading's crucial importance to the art historical discipline, little attention has been devoted to understanding the function of book groups and publishing circles as systems of knowledge mediation in feminist art history. This panel seeks to redress this omission by considering how para-institutional practices associated with libraries, bookshops, reading groups, and publishing collectives – particularly, but not exclusively, prior to the recognition of feminist scholarship within the academy – empowered women as readers and writers of art history and theory.

Speakers and Abstracts

The Subversive Woman Reader and Art Writing

Meaghan Clarke (University of Sussex)

The image of the woman reading was ubiquitous in late 19th- and early 20th- century painting and photography. Women gazing demurely down at small hardback volumes were the antithesis of the bespectacled women surrounded by books pictured on the pages of *Punch* magazine. In the latter the mockery of the 'dangerous' reading woman (intellectual New Woman, radical free-thinker or hysterical suffragist) revealed her significance and subversive possibilities. One space in which she could be found to be physically present was in exhibitions as both reader and writer on art.

Art History itself was at the point of formation and lacked an academic affiliation. Therefore, art publishing was a particularly important arena and one in which women were already established as essayists, reviewers, translators and biographers.

The library, the gallery and the 'at home' were important para-institutional spaces for the 'reading woman' to share knowledge about art and artists. While the trajectory of the reading woman is often elusive during this period, diaries, images and the texts themselves give insight into the nature of these exchanges. Women met in galleries and libraries, to discuss works, catalogues, archives and emergent periodicals. One nexus for collective action was the Women's Printing Society, staffed by women, its publishing portfolio encompassed texts on women's emancipation and exhibition catalogues. This paper will examine these overlapping networks and ask how they empowered women as readers and writers on art.

L'Académie des Femmes: Subversive readings, relational writings, intimate publics

Elke Krasny (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna)

In 1927, Natalie Clifford Barney founded L'Académie des Femmes, the Women's Academy, a self-proclaimed women-only institution. This Academy, acting as if it were an official body, subverted and parodied the hegemony of the men-only L'Académie Française. Women's Academy honoured feminist and lesbian authors as diverse as Colette, Gertrude Stein, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Renée Vivien, Djuna Barnes, Minal Loy, and Radclyffe Hall.

This feminist and lesbian avant-garde culture was rooted in the Fridays at Barney's Paris salon, hosted from 1909 onwards at 20, rue Jacob. Even though salon culture is based on conversations, Barney's Fridays cared for and promoted female, feminist, and lesbian authorship, readership, publishing, and the intimate circulation of texts. Genre-bending transgressions, including epistolary novels or film scripts, were based on reading each other performatively and conversationally.

In theoretical terms, I will use the notion of intimate publics (Lauren Berlant), linking it to subversive readings and relational writings. Barney's Fridays served as a testbed for feminist and lesbian subjectivities. Reading each other was a practice of subversion connecting lives and loves. Reading each other led to relational writing, rendering porous and fluid modernist boundaries between individually authored works: the private, the public, the personal, the affective, the romantic, the bodily, and the intellectual.

Barney's salon is understood here as a prototype in a speculative genealogy of feminist and lesbian reading groups. This salon cared for intimate publics in support of subversive readings and relational writings. It radically used the resources of the domestic sphere for self-instituting a strategically separatist Women's Academy.

Words of a Public Intellectual, ... or just a Woman Writing? Art and agency in women's periodicals in Iceland from the 1940s to 1960s

Hanna Guðlaug Guðmundsdóttir (University of Iceland, Reykjavík)

The first 'wave' of publications of women's periodicals in Iceland focused mainly on women's rights, legal rights, such as suffrage, but covered from the start (1895) also a wide variety of issues to reach a broad range of women readers. Articles from various directions were translated into Icelandic, and thus translation became in many ways an important form of public expression (Fraser, 2014) for women. Furthermore, prior to feminist discourse in art history in the 1970s, women wrote considerably on art and culture, promoting women's contribution when other periodicals chose to devalue or disregard them. However, these periodicals have been ignored, or considered marginal, regarded by many as 'woman writing', as the opposite of the (male) 'public intellectual' discourse on art and culture.

This paper will address how women persevered their agency in Iceland from the 1940s to 1960s and acted as artists, writers and readers on art, how women's periodicals continued to play an important role in shedding light on women's contribution to cultural life and in constructing feminist identities and communities (Bazin and Waters, ed., 2017). A close look at some writings in women's periodicals will reveal that the aim was to establish a women's history and legacy. This was vital, as although women artists became more visible on the artistic scene and participated actively in modern culture during that period, the public discourse on art was as gendered as ever.

Reading and Writing *Herstory*

Rachel Warriner (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

On Jacqueline Skiles' 1971 cover of *A Documentary Herstory of Women Artists in Revolution*, filling the space between the graphic inscription of the name of the publication and an elongated Venus symbol that cuts diagonally down the page, there are handwritten the names of 50 or so women involved in the development of the group. Designed as a record of the early moments of the feminist art movement in New York through the documentation of the actions, discussions and reactions to the group Women Artists in Revolution, founded in 1969, the *Herstory* collates a range of written responses to feminist arts-activism as it emerges. What is interesting is that although occasionally contributing articles, or as the subject of reviews included in the *Herstory*, the majority of those named on the cover are absent from the publication. Instead of a list of contributors, what is presented at the first encounter with the *Herstory* is a list of expected readers; conjuring a community of women reading and writing about each other's work, facilitating its serious consideration and the establishment of another kind of history. In this paper, I am going to examine how the imagined feminist reader was central to early publications such as the *Herstory* and *Heresies: A feminist publication on art and politics*, helping to shape a style of writing for feminism that is at once intimate and discursive, forming the sense of community and shared ambition that was crucial to the political and social development of feminist activism in the arts.

'Dear Readers...': Reading and studying as/in feminist art

Catherine Grant (Goldsmiths, University of London)

In a diagram that sets out the specific political formation of the consciousness-raising group, a comparison is made with the study group, which is described as dogmatic, 'not really investigating things', concerned only with 'scholasticism (book worship)' (Kathie Sarachild, 'Consciousness-Raising: A Radical Weapon', 1975). In reality, many feminist groups in the late 1960s and 1970s contained aspects of consciousness-raising alongside study, or study groups drew on consciousness-raising techniques in their attempts to theorise and historicise women's experience. This paper explores contemporary interest in the reading group, particularly within feminist artistic communities, contextualising it in relation to these early feminist formations. Arguing that the publications coming out of the women's liberation movement are profoundly influenced by the format of these groups, the ways in which reading can become a dialogue, or even a form of consciousness-raising, will be explored. Focusing on artworks and reading groups that engage with archival material from feminist histories, the focus will be on how reading can be embodied and made visible/audible through processes such as reading aloud, discussion and the reproduction of texts' original visual format. As Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker noted in their introduction to *Framing Feminism* (1987), the use of the facsimile form 'allows us to discern in residual form the living movement of history'. Examples will include the Feminist Duration Reading Group (2015–) and the Women of Colour Index Reading Group (2016–).

Reading Otherwise: Claiming collective spaces for reading

Laura Onions (University of Wolverhampton)

The image of the woman reader across art history is a familiar one. A solitary female figure, absorbed in the contents of a book that we cannot decipher, there is a look to reading. Despite the innocuous activity, women (reading) were frequently suspected of subverting daily structures and therefore demanding social control and 'surveillance' (Long 2003, 13). With a focus on contemporary artist-led groups, GU Women (Birmingham), The Ultras (National) and reading events/exhibitions, 'A Seat in Which to Read' (Wolverhampton, 2017), 'Ways of Learning' (Birmingham, 2018) this paper seeks to reconsider the gendered dimensions of reading in relation to space (and social control) and how this relationship, mediated through printed matter, subverts the 'look of reading' through claiming collective space.

The significance of interiority and the unseen, interconnecting with the peripheral and exterior within spaces of reading has been a confrontation between 'self and other' (Pearce, 1997). This presentation will question and reveal how this dialogical relationship changes or becomes politicised through reading models, how these groups nominate, share, advocate and vote, reflecting on reading as a transformative action; processes that strengthen the dynamics of communication and shape a space for individual and collective explorations of reading.