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Deepwell, Katy ORCID logo ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8188-0895> (2018) Feminist art manifestos/feminist politics. Cambridge Literary Review, 11 . ISSN 2042-129X [Article]

Published version (with publisher's formatting)

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Katy Deepwell

Feminist Art Manifestos/Feminist Politics

I STARTED COLLECTING FEMINIST ART MANIFESTOS in 2011, in preparation for a seminar I held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, with the aim that by reading them in public (out loud in a group setting), the character, depth, and diversity of feminist protests in the art world would become more visible. Art manifestos have an ephemeral quality, often printed as pamphlets, hand-outs, press releases or occasional artists' statements in art journals or exhibition catalogues, while many now circulate on the internet, and some are documented by artists on their websites. Women's contributions to the genre are often overlooked, from Valentine de Saint Point's 'Manifesto for Futurist Women' (1912) and 'Manifesto of Futurist Lust' (1913) onwards. Only a few contemporary feminist art manifestos have been regularly anthologised, such as VALIE EXPORT's 1972 'Women's Art', which was published in *Neues Forum* (no 228, Jan 1973) and later distributed at the exhibition of women artists that she curated called *MAGMA* (Vienna, 1976). There has been an academic tendency to confine histories of feminist art practices to the 1970s or to the West, while the spread of feminist art manifestos over time and across continents challenges this limited conception. With all this in mind I thought a collection of feminist art manifestos could make visible the varieties of global feminism and the shifts within feminism since the late 1960s, and in 2014 I published *Feminist Art Manifestos: An Anthology* as an electronic book, containing 35 manifestos about collective works and actions by women, and art production and film-making by feminist artists. I also maintain a list of feminist and feminist art manifestos online at <http://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-art-manifestos.asp>, part of the website's Feminist-Art-Observatory. The list has recently been updated to include several #MeToo-type interventions in the art world, such as the letter titled 'Not Surprised' about sexism and sexual harassment, signed by 3,000 women, and the 2017 Argentinian initiative 'Nosotras Proponemos/We Propose: a Declaration of Commitment

to Feminist Practices in Art /Permanent Assembly of Women Art Workers’.

In the ebook, I wanted to draw attention to the relationships between feminist politics as a set of ‘demands’ and feminist art practices and poetics as experiments in feminist aesthetics that focus on women artists’ subjectivity, expression and creative potential. There remain strong links between feminist art producers and broader conceptions of feminist cultural politics. Feminism has had its own internal debates since 1968 about whether it is another avant-garde movement or tendency in the field of art/politics, whether feminist art exhibits distinctive forms of avant-gardism, and whether feminism as a politics can only be recognised in specific kinds of cultural interventions in the arts. This is because feminist art is not an art style, a brand, a fashion trend or a recognisable artistic category, nor is it centred solely around images of ‘the body’ aka ‘women’s bodies’ or the question of women’s sexuality. Many women have argued against forms of avant-gardism within feminism, because the women’s art movement does not offer a unified style or set of concerns as art avant-gardes in modernism usually do, nor is the production of a manifesto simply a signal of an avant-garde emerging. Where feminist cultural politics provide a strong critique of the (male) historical avant-garde for its exclusions, or its celebration of feminine sensitivities among men while ignoring women’s cultural production, tactically these manifestos have advocated new ways of organising political/cultural resistance which remain avant-garde in the literal sense of the term, leading the way.

The manifestos in the book differ in form and mode of address, having appeared as flyers, posters, etc. while some were produced as artworks (Dora Garcia’s ‘100 Impossible Artworks’ (2001), Tkacova and Chisa’s ‘80: 20’ (2011)). Some developed from texts spoken in performances or were documents of actions: Carolee Schneemann’s ‘Woman in the Year 2000’ (1977), Eva Partum’s ‘Change, My Problem is a Problem of a Woman’ (1979) and YES! Association’s ‘The Equal Opportunities Agreement #1’ (2005). Others appeared as catalogue essays or announcements for exhibitions: for example Mierle Ukeles’

'Maintenance Art' (1969), Orlan's 'Carnal Art Manifesto' (2002), and Violetta Liagatchev's 'Constitution Intempestive de la Republique Internationale des Artistes Femmes' (1997). Some have circulated exclusively on the web, like VNS Matrix's 'Bitch Mutant Manifesto' (1994), SubRosa's 'Refugia: Manifesto for Becoming Autonomous Zones' (2002) or Elizabeth M. Stephen and Annie Sprinkle's 'Ecosex manifesto'(2011). Many different kinds of poetics emerge in how these documents are written, but frequently repetition is used alongside bullet points or lists to express the complexity and multiplicity of positions for and against particular views of the world. For example, The Old Boy Network's '100 Anti-Theses' (1997) consisted of 100 definitions beginning with: "Cyberfeminism is not a fragrance/ Cyberfeminism is not a fashion statement" and Violetta Liagatchev's list of constitutional articles included: "Article 9: Do not undervalue yourself, do not overvalue, knowing that you are free to do anything." Reversal, irony or humour abound, as from VNS Matrix: "The net's the parthenogenetic bitch-mutant feral child of big daddy mainframe", or The Guerrilla Girls as they recommend: "Be a loser", "Be impatient", "Be crazy", "Be anonymous", "Be an outsider" ('The Guerrilla Girls' Guide to Behaving Badly', 2010). In the case of the Austrian group, Eva and Co., their only manifesto announced not their beginning but their dissolution, its list of refusals to be co-opted as yet another artists' group within the art world and its funding structures signalling the difficulties of what any such group may achieve as an effective cultural intervention—not just in the fact of its existence but in its life-span.

The most infamous and widely reproduced feminist manifesto remains Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto*, circulated in unpublished formats from 1967 and remaining in print since 1971. Frequently misinterpreted as a manifesto for a 'Society for Cutting Up Men', its opening line reads:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the govern-

ment, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex.

Solanas' vision of "civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females", elsewhere the "groovy chicks", was a feminist critique of men's use of women in marriage and prostitution. Like the second part of de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, the targets of her critique are idealisations of Woman which men build to control and police women, e.g. "Daddy's Girls". Solanas highlights the double-standard in the over-veneration of the male "artist", excessively "heroicised", displaying "female traits" or disguising his "animalism"/ "degeneracy" with "obscurity, evasiveness, incomprehensibility, indirectness, ambiguity, and boredom" as if they were "marks of depth and brilliance", while "the female [artist] is reduced to highly limited, insipid and sub-ordinate roles, that is, to being male" or "boring passive activity" as an under-educated audience supporting this fiction. The SCUM, who the manifesto exhorts to action, are, by contrast, "too impatient to hope and wait for the debrainwashing of millions of assholes", and will take over "systematically fucking-up the system" because "dropping out is not the answer". The radical feminist arguments in Solanas' manifesto are frequently overlooked or characterised as psychotic, obsessive, paranoid, and raging, interpretations connected to her shooting of Andy Warhol in 1968 over a dispute about bringing her play *Up Your Ass* to the public.¹ No other feminist art manifestos I have found advocate the destruction of the male sex, nevertheless Solanas' SCUM Manifesto remains an important blueprint for the genre. Its words are echoed in both Rhani Lee Remedés' 'The SCUB manifesto' (2002) and in Martine Sym's 'Mundane Afro-futurist' opening line about women's boredom and irritation.

Central to all feminist manifestos is a critique of the privileges accorded to men: a critique of patriarchy which arises from currently proscribed roles for men and women, and in feminist art manifestos the focus

¹ Breanne Fahs *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman Who Wrote SCUM (And Shot Andy Warhol)* (Feminist Press, 2014).

is frequently on the limited view of the woman artist. 'Womaniesto' (1975), which was approved and signed by 80 women filmmakers in New York argued:

We do not accept the existing power structure and we are committed to changing it, by the content and structure of our images and by the ways we relate to each other in our work and with our audience...We see ourselves as part of the larger movement of women dedicated to changing society by struggling against oppression as it manifests itself in sexism, heterosexism, racism, classism, ageism and Imperialism.

The possibility of what women's creativity can be and might become is always set against stereotypes, limited horizons, a specific cultural and political situation and prevailing social values or beliefs which characterise discrimination. Many feminist art manifestos internationally affirm women's rights as human rights and point to the fact that without including or considering women's rights, all claims to be operating in a 'human rights framework' continue to reproduce male privilege in society: "we denounce any attempt, overt or covert, to suppress, inhibit, control or regiment her artistic functioning, or to interfere otherwise, with her basic right to freedom of expression" (15 women artists, Lahore 'Women Artists of Pakistan Manifesto' (1983)).

While centered on a critique of patriarchy, feminism has also always been a dynamic politics and the last forty years have witnessed a proliferation of different feminisms (ecofeminism; cyberfeminism; queer feminism and Afro-futurist feminism), often presented in contrast to the early politics of women's liberation, as if it were singular, even when this too was a very broad alliance of different social and cultural political groupings, Socialist, Marxist, and Radical/Separatist. The anthology displays a wide range of values that run through the manifestos' chosen topics: care, love, ideas of sexuality, witchcraft, and notions of creativity (both known and unknown). Many can appear utopian, and even when published to launch women's initiatives or to offer practical

programmes for change they were not corporate-style 'mission statements' nor party political-type manifestos. Despite much common ground as anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic, anti-ageist, anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist, these manifestos have also pursued different initiatives: for equal opportunities, for 'gender mainstreaming', or for separatism as a withdrawal from society or a necessary stage in women's self-development. Yet one of the underlying threads linking all feminist art manifestos is their opening of a space for the future of women's creative art practices in which feminist politics and women's creative potential are respected, recognised, and valued.

Several of the manifestos refer to the need for quotas to counteract discrimination and change the representation of women artists in our exhibitions and museums. Women artists are no longer a small minority amongst all artists, but discrimination continues because although they now represent 50% or more of those educated in the arts, they are regularly presented in selected shows at 30%. Women artists thus appear 'generically' and statistically as a minority group in the production of exhibitions or art reviews, and many questions regarding gender discrimination in the conception of exhibitions and the production of art history and criticism thereby remain tacit. In creating Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL)'s statement in 1970, Michelle Wallace and Faith Ringgold argued for 50% levels of representation for women, and particularly for black women artists, in open exhibitions in New York. Its distribution as a manifesto printed and displayed in exhibitions was also a provocation against "Brown Shit Art" or "Token Art Niggas" and a call to action: "To support the exposure of real black art which is done by black women who, as mothers and sisters, are concerned with the Afro-American situation of today." Chila Burman's essay 'Why have there been no great black women artists?' (1987) takes up the question of Linda Nochlin's renowned 1971 essay "Why have there been no Great women artists?" and turns her analysis to the discrimination against ethnic minority women artists in the UK, particularly in art schools, examining how these artists and their works are judged in limited and stereotyped ways.

Two different manifesto interventions in 2005 raised again the issue of representation of women artists' works in the museum. The ARCO manifesto arose from a series of public debates about feminism at an art fair, and was directed at museum directors' and collectors' acquisition policies. Repeating a question from an early poster of the activist group The Guerrilla Girls: "What will your collection be worth when sexism and racism are no longer fashionable?", this manifesto called for governments and public art museums to initiate research on women artists' under-representation and was signed by many leading feminist curators and art historians in Europe and the USA. In Sweden, which many regard as a model of social democratic practices for equality between the sexes, art collective YES! Association were prompted by the opening of a major touring feminist art exhibition to offer an analysis of institutionalised discrimination in museums. Using the language of contract law, 'The Equal Opportunities Agreement #1', which they presented in a performance reading, was an attempt to counteract institutionalised discrimination against women artists and encourage participating museums to make a commitment to equal opportunities indefinitely into the future.

Will women artists no longer need to protest their representation, and that of women in ethnic minorities and religious minorities, when museums show their work at levels appropriate to their existence as artists in the population? When discrimination in terms of numbers was more acute (often 10%), much earlier feminist texts had questioned whether the gallery system would ever provide recognition for women. After their group's exhibition proposals had been rejected, Berg and Sjøo opted instead to reject the art world's value systems: "Commercial life is the enemy of art and art cannot accept its visual signs as part of our language. DEATH TO THE PLASTIC CULTURE." Echoing this tone more recently, in another ironic comment on an art world where women's presence is often rare and their quality constantly questioned, Silvia Ziraneck stated in her 2013 manifesto 'Manifesta' we need: "MORE QUALITY THROUGH FEMALE QUANTITY". Ziraneck's argument highlights what counts as 'Art' in two ways: no assessment of 'more' quality can be made if there is no 'more' quantity of women

artists on display (refuting the idea that a woman artist is 'rare' and exceptional), and the quality of what women produce will only be 'more' if there is an overall increase in the quantity of works of women artists' works made and seen. Even more pointed as a critical reflection on the state of art world feminist participation, Tkacova and Chisa's manifesto, presented in large letters on the outside of the Romanian pavilion in the Venice Biennale of 2011, weighed up what representation will mean as a list of 'benefits' for women artists participating in a major art biennale by playing on Pareto's 80/20 principle that 80% of effects tend to emerge from 20% of causes, arguing for 80% "confrontation, verification, gratification" and 20%, "invisibility is resistance".

Representation in numerical strength is only one part of countering discrimination and injustices in distribution of wealth and of goods. As social and political theorist Nancy Fraser has argued, recognition is also key.² Many feminist manifestos, from the British-born, avant-garde writer Mina Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914) to the Italian art critic and founder of Rivolta Femminile Carla Lonzi's *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1970) have warned against the illusion that feminism is solely about equality and that reaching this goal would extinguish sexism or patriarchal thinking. For Mina Loy, advocacy of equality alone lacks an apprehension of life, and a recognition of women's sexual freedom:

Leave off looking to men to find out what you are *not*—seek within yourselves to find out what you *are*. As conditions are at present constituted—you have the choice between **Parasitism, & Prostitution**—or *Negation*.

For Rivolta Femminile, sixty years later, women needed to claim an independent subjectivity in art and life:

Our message to man, to the genius, to the rational visionary is this: the future of the world does not lie in moving continually forwards

2 Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution Or Recognition?: A Political-philosophical Exchange* (Verso, 2003).

along a path mapped out by man's desire for overcoming difficulties. The future of the world is open: it lies in starting along the path from the beginning again with woman as a subject.

Recognition for the work that women do and the value of that work rises again and again in the anthologised texts. Ukeles' 'Manifesto for Maintenance Art: Proposal for an exhibition, Care' (1969) makes central the tension between development and maintenance, redefining Marcuse/Freud's death instinct, associated with "separation; individuality; Avantgarde", against a life instinct focused on "perpetuation and MAINTENANCE of the species; survival systems and operations; equilibrium". Maintenance work is often invisible, repetitive and unrewarding. It is even conceived of as the anti-thesis to Art; if this is held up to be only the free intellectual labour determined by a creative individual. The question becomes: "Who's going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?" Highlighting this split and suggesting a radical transformation of one into the other opened the door for Ukeles' radical reconsideration of economics and ecology, of questions of production and waste, of what is cared for or disregarded in our society and how we conceive of relations between production and reproduction. "I will simply do these maintenance everyday things, and flush them up to consciousness, exhibit them, as Art...MY WORKING WILL BE THE WORK". So Ukeles proceeded to wash the museum, to examine cleaning/maintenance rituals as art, to thank the sanitation workers for their labour, and became the unofficial artist-in-residence of the Sanitation Department of New York over the next 40 years, working on many projects, including the transformation of Staten Island's Fresh Kills Landfill into a public park.

These manifestos thus do much more than present a critique of patriarchy. They offer a new view of what women artists' creativity will consist of in the future and announce this possibility: see for example, Carolee Schneemann's 'Woman in the Year 2000' (written in 1977):

She will study Art Istory [sic] courses enriched by the inclusion, discovery and reevaluation of works by women artists: works (and

lives) until recently buried away, wilfully destroyed, ignored or re-attributed (to male artists with whom they were associated).

Berg and Sjoo's rejection of middle-class mores and the dominant culture of abstraction in the galleries of the 1970s is accompanied by the question: "HOW DOES ONE COMMUNICATE WOMEN'S STRENGTH, STRUGGLE, RISING UP FROM OPPRESSION, BLOOD, CHILDBIRTH, SEXUALITY?" In 'Manifesto for a Radical Femininity for An Other Cinema' (1977) Klonaris and Thomadaki claim that their cinema of women is also a claim for women's autonomy, for independent thinking and creation, for a new form of cinema removed from the fantastic projections about women's culture or 'otherness' in writing by men. SubRosa in 'Refugia' (2002) advance a post-modern commons, a space for new forms of hybridity and possibility to emerge in autonomous zones, while Julie Perini outlines her philosophy for a renegotiation of relations between director and subject, process and result in her 'Relational Filmmaking Manifesto' (2010). Even if we cannot predict what women will produce in the future, we do know that if their contribution is recognised and more widely shown, if their education is transformed, what they will produce will be something unexpected, different and positive on its own terms.



Contents list of Katy Deepwell (ed), *Feminist Art Manifestos: An Anthology* (KT press, 2014)

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- Nancy Spero: Feminist Manifesto (c. 1970-1971)
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Other Manifestos referred to in the article:

Valentine de Saint Point: 'The Manifesto of Futurist Woman (Response to F. T. Marinetti)' (1912)

Valentine de Saint Point: 'Futurist Manifesto of Lust' (11 Jan 1913)

Valerie Solanas: SCUM manifesto (1967)

Simone de Beauvoir: *The Second Sex* (1949)

Linda Nochlin: 'Why have there been no Great Women Artists?' ART News, Jan. 1971

Mina Loy: 'Feminist Manifesto' (1914), unfinished and not published until 1982, in Mina Loy *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. Sequel to her 'Aphorisms for the Future' (1914) in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed) *The Gender of Modernism* (1990)

Carla Lonzi: *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1970)

Nosotras Proponemos: 'Declaration of Commitment to Feminist Practices in Art: Permanent Assembly of Women Art Workers' (2017) [<http://nosotrasproponemos.org/we-propose/>]

'Not Surprised', an open letter (2017); signed by many women artists and curators and writers, rather than strictly a manifesto, this is one response to sexual harassment in the art world. [<http://www.not-surprised.org/original-letter/>]