

rethinking  
art's histories

# Gender, artWork and the global imperative

A materialist feminist critique

**Angela Dimitrakaki**



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Manchester University Press

Manchester and New York

*distributed in the United States exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan*

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Published by Manchester University Press  
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9NR, UK  
and Room 400, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA  
[www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk](http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk)

Distributed in the United States exclusively by  
Palgrave Macmillan, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York,  
NY 10010, USA

Distributed in Canada exclusively by  
UBC Press, University of British Columbia, 2029 West Mall,  
Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z2

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 8359 4      hardback

First published 2013

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Typeset in Minion with Myriad  
by Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited  
Printed in Great Britain  
by TJ International, Padstow

# Gender, artWork and the global imperative

MANCHESTER  
1824

Manchester University Press

# rethinking art's histories

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## Acknowledgements

The book is the culmination of many years of absorbing, doubting, testing and re-gaining confidence in a politically meaningful connection between feminism and contemporary art. My journey began with my doctoral research in the late 1990s, with Susan Malvern (to whom I am indebted), and has continued through teaching and writing. Completing this book in 2013, after several years of focused research in conditions of global turbulence, is my way of accepting that the issues preoccupying me in relation to feminist praxis will not go away in my lifetime and will require regular revisiting and revising. I would like to express my gratitude to all those who helped me remain calm in the face of this prospect and who enable and motivate me to keep trying. Thanks are due to my mother, Despoina (the first feminist I loved and fought against), my sister, Christina (an expert in solidarity), and my wee daughter, Alma (the negation of my negation); my students at the University of Edinburgh for occasionally asserting that feminist values can save lives; my colleagues and friends, especially Jenny, Dimitris and Diogenis; Miltos Tsiantis, the best interlocutor on the complex subject of historical materialism I could ever have had; Oskari Kuusela for a lot really, including for demonstrating the persistence of ideology against which feminism is practised. Above all, I remain indebted to the artists, curators and historians whose groundbreaking work inspired this research – in particular Ursula Biemann whose video essays, when I first encountered them in the early 2000s, suggested to me that something was changing; I am grateful to the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), The Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland, and the University of Edinburgh for their financial support; to the series editors Marsha Meskimmon, Amelia Jones and the MUP team for their patience and encouragement; to *Mujeres Públicas* for the cover photo and all the individuals and organisations that provided images with such generosity. Last but not least, I am grateful to the women who, as au pairs, have supported me in my often impossible double role of migrant waged labourer and unwaged mother: Tuuli, Emmi, Henna, Moona, Emma, Jenna, thank you. In Chapter 2, my discussion of Mare Tralla's *WeeViews* draws on my short article, 'The Global

Art World and Critical Melancholy: Mare Tralla's WeeViews', *Read More* Issue 7 (2008): 3–6, freely available at <http://issuu.com/horsecrossarts/docs/read-moreissue-7>. Chapter 4 is a slightly revised version of my article 'Materialist Feminism for the Twenty-first Century: The Video Essays of Ursula Biemann', *Oxford Art Journal* 30 (2) (2007), 205–32. I am grateful for the permission to reproduce it here.

# Contents

List of illustrations	page vii
Acknowledgements	xi
Introduction	
Capital, gender and the work of art: an intervention of, and in, materialist feminism	1
<b>1</b> Feminist politics and art history: from postmodernism to global capitalism	25
<b>2</b> 'The gender issue': lessons from post-socialist Europe	71
<b>3</b> Travel as (gendered) work: global space, mobility and the 'woman artist'	107
<b>4</b> Gendered economies and knowledge production: Ursula Biemann's video essays and materialist feminism for the twenty-first century	151
<b>5</b> Masculinity and the economic subject in contemporary art	183
<b>6</b> Acting on power: critical collectives, curatorial visions and art as life	209
Postscript: what is a feminist beginning?	247
Bibliography	255
Index	271



## List of illustrations

- |         |  |    |
|---------|--|----|
| 1.1     | Pipilotti Rist, <i>Ever Is Over All</i> (1997). Audio video installation (video still). Dimensions variable. © Pipilotti Rist. Courtesy of the artist, Hauser & Wirth and Luhring Augustine.   | 30 |
| 1.2–1.3 | Marcelo Expósito and Nuria Vila, <i>Tactical Frivolity + Rhythms of Resistance</i> (2007). Video, 39'. Stills. Courtesy of Marcelo Expósito.   | 32 |
| 1.4     | Tracey Emin, <i>My Bed</i> (1998). Installation. Courtesy of DACS and the artist.  | 35 |
| 1.5     | Andrea Fraser, <i>Untitled</i> (2003). Video, 60'. Still. Courtesy of the artist.  | 37 |
| 1.6     | Marina Abramovic, <i>Role Exchange</i> (1975, Netherlands). Two Super 8 cameras. Installation, no sound, colour, 19' 50". Stills. Courtesy of the artist.  | 38 |
| 1.7     | Hito Steyerl, <i>Lovely Andrea</i> (2007). Video, 30'. Still. Courtesy of the artist.  | 40 |
| 2.1     | Tanja Ostojić, <i>Looking for a Husband with EU Passport</i> (2000–5). Participatory web project/combined media installation. Detail: The ad. Photo: Borut Krajnc. Copyright/courtesy of Tanja Ostojić.  | 77 |
| 2.2     | Tanja Ostojić, <i>Untitled/After Courbet</i> (L'origine du monde, 46 × 55 cm) (2004). Colour photo, 46 × 55 cm. Photo: David Rych. Copyright/Courtesy of Tanja Ostojić/David Rych.   | 79 |
| 2.3     | Mare Tralla, <i>her.space</i> (1996–97). CD-ROM installation. Detail. Courtesy of the artist.  | 83 |
| 2.4–2.5 | Mare Tralla, <i>Heroine of Post-Socialist Labour</i> (2004). Video, 3' 55". Video stills. Courtesy of the artist.  | 84 |
| 2.6     | Tanja Ostojić, <i>Looking for a Husband with EU Passport</i> (2000–5). Participatory web project/combined media installation. Installation view 'Integration Impossible?'. Kunstpavillon Innsbruck, 2008. Photo: Rupert Larl. Copyright/courtesy of Tanja Ostojić. | 87 |

- 2.7–2.8 Mare Tralla, *WeeViews* (1997 to date). Looped video, 7'. Stills. Courtesy of the artist. 90
- 3.1 Lin+Lam, *Departure* (2004–6). 48', single-channel video and three-channel video installation Still. Courtesy of the artists. © Lin + Lam. 120
- 3.2 Angela Melitopoulos, *CORRIDOR X* (2006), DVD (still), double projection, colour, sound, ca. 130'. Part of Transcultural Geographies. Courtesy of the artist. 123
- 3.3 Ursula Biemann, *The Black Sea Files* (2005). Synchronised video essay. 43'. Still. Courtesy of the artist. 126
- 3.4–3.5 Jenny Marketou, *Translocal* (1996–2001). Detail of project. Courtesy of the artist. 3.4: Setting up the tent on the Police Boat, Rotterdam, 1996. 3.5: Setting up the tent in Ramallah, 1997. 129
- 3.6–3.7 Ann-Sofi Sidén, *Warte Mal! Prostitution after the Velvet Revolution* (1999). Thirteen-channel video installation with photographs and text. Details. Courtesy of the artist. 135
- 4.1 Ursula Biemann, *Performing the Border*, 1999, 45'. Video still. Courtesy of the artist. 157
- 4.2 Ursula Biemann, *Writing Desire*, 2000, 26'. Video still. Courtesy of the artist. 160
- 4.3 Ursula Biemann, *Remote Sensing*, 2001, 53'. Video still. Courtesy of the artist. 163
- 5.1 Steve McQueen, *Gravesend* (2007), 35 mm film transferred to high definition, 17' 58". Still. Courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York/Paris. 187
- 5.2 Zaneta Vangeli, *The Social Plastic of Macedonia/The Inner Circle* (1996). 2 triptychs, b/w photo/wood, each 100 × 210 cm. Installation detail. Left: The Archbishop of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, Gospodin Gospodin Mihail. Middle: Baškim Ademi, underground guru. Right: The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ljubomir Danailov Frčkoski. Courtesy of the artist. 193
- 5.3 Artur Żmijewski, *80064* (2004), video, 11'. Video still. Courtesy of the artist and Foksal Gallery Foundation. 194
- 5.4 Dani Marti, *Bacon's Dog* (2010), video still. HDV, 2:55, two-channel projection. Duration 11' 30". Courtesy of the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney. 196
- 5.5–5.6 Renzo Martens, *Episode 3: Enjoy Poverty* (2009), 90'. Stills. Courtesy of Wilkinson Gallery London, Galerie Fons Welters Amsterdam, and the artist. 198

- 6.1 Tanja Ostojić, 'Strategies of Success/Curators Series' (2001–3).  
*I'll Be Your Angel* (2001), four-day performance with Harald  
Szeemann, Plato of Humankind, 49th Venice Biennale. Photo:  
Borut Krajnc. Copyright/Courtesy of Tanja Ostojić. 214
- 6.2 Tanja Ostojić, 'Strategies of Success/Curators Series' (2001–3).  
*Vacation with Curator* (2003). Photo Collage, 62.5 × 93 cm.  
From: the project at 2nd Tirana Biennale, Albania, with  
curator Edi Muka. Paparazzi photos: Rudina Memaga,  
Arian Risvani, Heldi Pema. Copyright/Courtesy of  
Tanja Ostojić. 215
- 6.3 Mujeres Públicas, public action, Buenos Aires, 8 March 2004.  
Courtesy of Mujeres Públicas. 230
- 6.4 MFK, Picnic Poetry in Pildammsparken, Malmö, 10  
September 2006. Photo by MFK. Courtesy of MFK.  
MFK logo design (on flag) by Lisa Nyberg, 2006. 230

# Introduction

## Capital, gender and the work of art: an intervention of, and in, materialist feminism

On the densely woven histories of women, art, work, capital, feminism

This book is about feminism, art and its histories in the globalised socio-economic paradigm of the early twenty-first century. The exploration of ideas and practices in the pages that follow constitutes an effort to think through the contradictions of this perplexing moment, which feminism must claim as its own. This is because women are proving to be at great disadvantage in the socio-economic processes we understand as globalisation. Not all women of course. If we aim for the big picture, some, very few, women are, or at least appear to be, in a much better position than others. And so globalisation can also be apprehended as an epoch where the exploitation of woman by woman has been realised as a tragic extension of Marx's understanding of capitalism as man's exploitation of man. Let me provide an example. In December 2009 *The Economist* published a special issue on 'Women and Work'. Subtitled 'We did it!' and featuring on its cover a drawing of Rosie the Riveter, a popular American icon during the Second World War when women were urged to (temporarily) take up men's place as industrial workers for the good of the country, the special issue's editorial stated:

At a time when the world is short of causes for celebration, here is a candidate: within the next few months women will cross the 50% threshold and become the majority of the American workforce. Women already make up the majority of university graduates in the OECD countries and the majority of professional workers in several rich countries, including the United States. Women run many of the world's great companies, from PepsiCo in America to Areva in France. Women's economic empowerment is arguably the biggest social change of our times.<sup>1</sup>

This triumphal statement requires contextualisation. First, articles in the same special issue highlighted an important fact: the entry of women into the formally acknowledged labour force did not become possible through a redistribution of domestic labour between men and women. Nor did it happen because of a welfare state in support of high quality, affordable (let alone free),

public childcare. Rather, what primarily permitted American women's flooding of waged labour sites was an army of cheap female domestic servants imported from less privileged societies (in this case, mostly Mexico).<sup>2</sup> Second, most women do not run multinational companies on six-figure salaries. Rather, many work for multinational companies that outsource their production units so that they can hire cheap female labour outside the First World. Third, the white female industrial worker figure, represented by Rosie the Riveter, hardly represents women at work today – and certainly not in a developed economy such as the United States. The entry of women into waged labour is connected with capitalism's transformation into a service economy.<sup>3</sup> Yet the last sentence of *The Economist* quotation above makes an insightful connection: contrary to dominant strands of feminist thinking that underplay the links between economic and social processes, the editorial asserts that an economic fact is translated into, and must be understood in terms of, *social change*. And significantly, the editorial also sees women's position in the economy as central to 'the biggest social change of our time'. Even if women's actual position in the economy is hereby blatantly misrepresented, the link between women and the economy is established as the motor of contemporary social life and its transformation. An emphasis on this link is also claimed in the present study, although it is pursued through attention to the often wayward and experimental practices comprising art and its contexts. Outside the circles of art-world intellectuals, such practices are rarely ever associated with the affirmation or subversion of neoliberal ideology, for instance, or with the boosting of knowledge economies or with the glamorisation of mobility. In this respect, this study attempts to do something new: to investigate how a complex production paradigm, globalisation, typically experienced as 'culture', engages the gendered territories of art and vice versa.

But how is art indeed relevant to all the above? An answer to this question can begin in many different ways. First, the feminist art movement – that should be perhaps renamed as the feminist art and art history movement, since art history played a major role in the movement's claims and direction – illuminated the inseparability of art as a gendered practice from the power relations constituting a gendered society. This movement, focused on art and its histories, took shape in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, mainly in the West in interaction with, and as part of, a militant women's movement. Feminist art, like feminist art history, did not provide, and could not have provided, a unified terrain of artistic and social critique because, as in all spheres of human action, ideological divisions in this terrain were deeply connected with women's and feminists' different lives as well as historical process as such. Precisely how second-wave feminism fitted within a broader historical process is a moot point at present. And this has important implications for understanding how feminist art and art history operated within the same

historical process. As regards second-wave feminism in general, in recent years there has been the argument that 'the cultural changes jump-started by the second wave, salutary in themselves, have served to legitimate a structural transformation of capitalist society that runs directly counter to feminist visions for a just society'.<sup>4</sup>

Groundbreaking and devastating, this argument, at least as shaped by American feminist theorist Nancy Fraser, does not constitute a charge against second-wave feminism but an astute analysis of its political economy. Irrespective of its motives and intentions, how feminism's second wave operated within a totality of social and economic relations after the Second World War emerged as an urgent issue for feminism at the most recent *fin de siècle*. Feminist art history, and feminist cultural analysis more generally, possessed this way of thinking from early on. Griselda Pollock, a founding figure of feminist art history, and others persistently argued that even when feminist intentions are present, these do not guarantee that a work of art or a cultural practice achieves a subversion, let alone transformation, of gender and related hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> That said, it has been really hard to determine what does, which is partly why the feminist art and art history movement spent much of its energy debating which strategy, realised as art practice and/or theory, would stand the best chance of meeting feminist objectives.

But did all feminists share the same objectives? The short answer is yes *and* no. Whereas all feminists agreed on the objective of ending women's oppression, there was no consensus on what this oppression was an outcome of. This becomes in fact clearer if we look at art. While some feminists merely wished for equal representation of male and female artists (dead or alive!) in art institutions, others saw the very institutions of art as representative of broader structures and ideologies that were inherently oppressive to women (and most men). For these feminists, the problem was not merely access but what one claimed access to. And there were a number of variants within this divided position concerning art as an institution as well as similarly divided positions on other matters. With the benefit of hindsight, we can say today that *only those feminists who claimed access to art's existent institutions met (some of) their objectives*. Of course, their struggle entailed and pressed for institutional reform. For example, they had to convincingly argue that women are just as good artists as men so that collectors and museums would start to buy and show women's work. This was partly achieved, and so we have a number of successful and highly visible women artists today. And the same pretty much happened with female curators. But these reforms did not amount to a new art world. Successful women artists do not necessarily wish for a new art world where their 'success', as defined in a capitalist market economy, might be undermined.

In 2006, Britain's Channel 4 documentary series 'Artshock' presented renowned female artist Tracey Emin investigating which factors in women's lives prevent women artists from securing as good sales as male colleagues.<sup>6</sup> The questions posed by Emin are in fact highly relevant to this study, as they highlight the connection between a woman's so-called life choices (for example, to have children or not) and her success in the environments of paid-for work. But the question for Emin is how women *can* sell, not whether selling and buying in capitalist markets possibly structures women's exploitation and oppression. Indeed, we have witnessed the unstoppable unfolding of an art market where even socially oriented feminist art is ultimately inscribed not as a practice conducive to social justice but as a valuable curiosity, politically correct but preferably shocking, and often exotic – if the work is made by an artist who happens to bear the credentials of cultural otherness. As expected, not all varieties of cultural otherness are welcome by the market as the alpha art institution. Instead, market and institutions subordinate to it are in a position to regulate entry, so that different cultural others can exist in a competitive, antagonistic relationship. One 'benefit' of this is that the entry of this or that cultural other into the institution can assume the guise of political success and be perceived as a privilege that few would oppose. And, as *Third Text* founder Rasheed Araeen has polemically suggested, postcolonial critique and identity politics (with which second-wave feminism was closely allied) had exactly the same fate in the art world.<sup>7</sup>

The bottom line is that we must recognise *feminism as an ideologically divided terrain*, one connected with broader material socio-economic divisions. Arguably, for the sake of a future-oriented solidarity, Fraser's argument underplayed the issue of ideological divisions within feminism and so sees second-wave feminism at large as enabling or at least dovetailing with processes that – today, we know – have deepened most women's oppression (and also men's). This study begins by acknowledging ideological divisions within feminism. It thus sides with a current of feminist praxis, known as materialist feminism, which became particularly important in the early years of second-wave feminism. But as many have observed, after the 1970s materialist feminism receded.<sup>8</sup> This is important to remember when (re)thinking feminist histories, also or perhaps especially in the arts. In short, as postmodernism advanced, materialist feminism lost ground but feminism *did not*, found instead to thrive hand in hand with postmodernism.<sup>9</sup> How can we resolve this absurd equation?

Perhaps we cannot, yet. Such a rethinking of the course of feminist (art) histories can only be achieved if we start reflecting on the kind of feminism we need in the first half of the twenty-first century. Beyond art history's feminist project, materialist feminism is now making an inspiring come-back.



Indicatively, in 2012, the editorial of the first issue of *Lies: A Journal of Materialist Feminism* stated:

we draw on and participate in multiple traditions of thought and struggle: feminism, Marxism, queer theory, communist theory, and anti-racist theory. We find abstraction useful but we aim to keep our ideas grounded, to see how the contours of thought are also social relationships. We are careful that whatever work or politics our ideas imply is desirable, while not forgetting that an idea is never a brick, and in this way our feminist practice is materialist.<sup>10</sup>

The above excerpt already points to an expanded, exploratory and experimental materialist feminism wishing to leave no stone (or brick) unturned in an effort to understand what exactly constitutes the material terms of gender-based oppression. This study hopes to contribute to this new materialist feminism and, by examining issues that pertain to art, to strengthen its interdisciplinary make-up. The book's thematic and methodological orientation were decided with this in mind, and should, in the first instance, be seen as an attempt to revive the interrupted project of materialist feminism in art history and to highlight the latter's relevance for a rigorous reading of recent developments.

By 'materialist feminism' I mean a feminism that is informed by historical materialism in the broadest sense, stressing an analytical commitment to illuminating the interpenetration of gender hierarchies and capitalism, where such interpenetration is seen to produce material, and not least, ideological effects. The rise of an economic subject in contemporary art supplanting the cultural subjects of postmodernism, as I argue in subsequent chapters, the newly totalising tendencies of contemporary capital and the hugely influential new terminologies emanating primarily from a revitalised Marxist critique of globalisation (often drawing on and updating the lessons of Italian Autonomia from the 1970s) are three reasons that necessitate, in my view, a rethinking of the possibilities of materialist feminism in art history and beyond.<sup>11</sup> And this is indeed underway, precisely because of the exacerbation of social discontent that has accompanied the consolidation of global capital in the 1990s and its regime of 'permanent crisis' from the following decade to date. As put by feminist social theorist and activist Chandra Talpade Mohanty:

political shifts to the right, accompanied by global capitalist hegemony, privatization and increased religious, ethnic and racial hatreds, pose very concrete challenges for feminists. In this context, I ask what it would mean to be attentive to the micropolitics of everyday life as well as to the larger processes that recolonize the culture and identities of people across the globe. How we think of the local in/of the global and vice versa without falling into colonizing or cultural relativist platitudes about difference is crucial in this intellectual and



political landscape. And for me, this kind of thinking is tied to a revised race- and-gender conscious historical materialism.<sup>12</sup>

Like Mohanty, I consider the exchange between feminism and historical materialism a response to, and an outcome of, historical forces. Ultimately, it is these forces that suggest the focal points of this study as described in the book's title: gender, artWork and the global imperative. The book title does not name 'these forces' as 'capital' (the title's absent guest, whose place at the table no one can dare challenge) in order to enhance the impression of capital's spectral presence – now perceptible, now imperceptible – and its diffusion into and across social, economic and sexual relations. Instead, the title names two other more ambiguous terms, whose relevance to feminist politics in the arts is hereby claimed. I am referring, of course, to the title's 'artWork' and 'global imperative'. Let's begin with the latter, as a prerequisite for understanding the former.

Globalisation has become a colloquial term since the 1990s though it entered the conceptual apparatus of art history a bit later. A declared engagement with globalisation as the defining framework of contemporary art emerged in art history in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with the first reader explicitly focused on the subject appearing in anglophone literature only in 2011.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, art history and cultural analysis more generally witnessed (are witnessing) a lot of confusion as to what globalisation actually means. The word 'global' had become so ideologically dominant in the previous fifteen years as to be constantly appropriated by discourses and research fields under pressure to be updated and 'modernise'. These efforts were premised on the observation that ultimately 'globalisation' is an empty vessel awaiting content.<sup>14</sup> And in many respects these voices were right. Globalisation can be simply described as a process of something spreading around the globe. And yet it is far from accidental that the term 'globalisation' became itself viral on a global scale during a particular phase in the history of capitalism, one defining the closure of the twentieth century. It is not, for example, that the widespread use of 'globalisation' coincided with the spread of patriarchy or socialism around the world. Patriarchy was already there and socialism is nowhere. Globalisation thus refers us to the globalisation of capitalism, to the full encompassing of geographically dispersed human life by capital – an encompassing that required the prior colonisation of world resources during the era of Western imperialism and the discrediting of any alternatives to capitalism. But the era of Western imperialism has gone and Soviet culture, for those who considered it an alternative to capitalism, ended noisily around 1990.

As I write these lines, in 2012, post-Maoist China is the second economic power in the world, fully operative in the global capitalist market. Globalisation cannot therefore be equated with Americanisation, although