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working with feminism: curating and exhibitions in Eastern Europe

Katrin Kivimaa, TLU Press, Tallinn, 2012, €12, 237pp., ISBN: 978-9985-58-753-9 (Pbk)

When it comes to artists who originate from Eastern Europe, is there room for only one Marina Abramović in the West? Or is Pussy Riot a more relevant example nowadays? While there are no references to Abramović and Pussy Riot in *Working with Feminism*, the book introduces many other, much less known contemporary artists and their social and political contexts. As editor Katrin Kivimaa explains in her preface, the collection came out of the symposium *Common Differences: Issues for Feminist Curating in Post-Socialist Europe*, which took place in May 2011 at the Estonian Academy of Arts in Tallinn, and which was itself inspired by the exhibit *Gender Check: Femininity and Masculinity in the Art of Eastern Europe* curated by Bojana Pejić. *Gender Check* took place first in Vienna in 2009 and then in Warsaw in 2010, and it exhibited a cross-section of socialist and post-socialist art, the first such event with a critique of patriarchal power relations as the central curatorial concept. *Working with Feminism* also shows that *Gender Check*, while certainly a watershed event, didn't arise out of a vacuum, but was preceded by some thirty years of (initially sporadic) women-centred, feminist or queer curatorial projects that were smaller in scope. The analysis of this time period, from the late 1970s until recent years, makes *Working with Feminism* a timely retrospective of a history full of abrupt breaks, but nevertheless a history of resilience and increasingly sharp critique. This book is a necessary contribution to the still-young field of curatorial theory that, according to Angela Dimitrakaki's assertion in this volume, has been ignoring the influence of feminist art and art criticism on the curatorial practices over the past forty years (p. 25). The fact that this collection of seven essays and two interviews not only focuses on feminism but also on underrepresented countries—Slovenia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Macedonia and Serbia—makes it a groundbreaking endeavour in its field.

In her essay 'Rethinking our im/possibilities: Or do Baltic States need feminist curating?' Kivimaa asserts that 'Each individual involved should also keep asking what is the background against which making feminism locally needs to be measured' (p. 93). She then offers this crucial rhetorical question: 'Is it rather gendered social and economic inequalities making up the patterns on the social fabric we inhabit?' (p. 93), which echoes in various ways across all the essays in the collection. One example is an interesting juxtaposition of

Izabela Kowalczyk and her compatriot Paweł Leszkowicz. In her essay 'Feminist Exhibitions in Poland: From Identity to the Transformation of Visual Order', Kowalczyk surveys feminist and queer group exhibits in Poland through a critical lens borrowed from Judith Butler and Jacques Rancière. In his essay 'The Power of Queer Curating in Eastern Europe', Leszkowicz offers a Freudian analysis of his own work as a prolific queer curator in the past decade. Kowalczyk troubles the persistent dilemma that can be summed up as follows: (1) an overemphasis on discrimination based on gender and/or sexuality obscures other inequalities, especially those based on class, ethnicity, health and age, but (2) to set aside the critique of patriarchy is to play into the hands of the all-too-prevalent sexism-deniers. Kowalczyk's answer is to keep fighting discrimination on all fronts, even if it means leaving identity politics behind. By contrast, Leszkowicz seems like a curator firmly rooted in identity politics, affirming the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender identity in order to fight homophobia and clear the way for 'intimate democracy' (p. 130). Where both curators/critics meet is in their conviction that art—if and only if it is informed equally by theory and activism, and mediated via thoughtful curatorial projects—can have the power to disrupt the *status quo* and its oppressive power relations.

Although not all the authors are as optimistic as Kowalczyk and especially Leszkowicz, the point of *Working with Feminism* is not only to inform, but rather transform, and this begins with the very notion of what the term 'post-socialist' means today, well over two decades since Eastern Europe abandoned its various versions of state socialism. In her chapter, Angela Dimitrakaki throws a wrench into what is stereotypically associated with the term post-socialist:

...in 2012 there are plenty of reasons that compel us to describe Europe at large as post-socialist. What unites Estonia, Britain and Greece are governmental mandates that seek to convince these countries' populations that they must *not* fail at capitalism ... The imperative is always the same: to privatise health, education, childcare, water, islands, national monuments, transport, solutions to global warming, even the police. (p. 22)

Dimitrakaki goes on to challenge feminist curating, which she deems as merely 'reforming' at the moment, to at least ask, 'What is to be done? And who will do it?' (p. 28). The implied answer seems to be: feminist art exhibits and performances need to openly counter the global neo-liberal capitalism, and never aim for recognition by and absorption within it.

Finally, the choice of the cover image deserves special attention. A reproduction of the exhibition booklet *Woman with Camera* (the exhibition took place in Riga in 1977), the image features a young woman pointing her camera at the viewer. We learn from Māra Traumane's essay 'Women's art and denial of feminism: history of exhibitions in Latvia 1977–2011' that the young woman is a fashion model who worked with Jānis Kreicbergs, the organiser of the exhibit; that the picture was taken by him as well, not by one of the artists in the exhibit; and that the *Woman*

with Camera participants were all women, exhibiting together for the very first time (pp. 169–170). Upon closer inspection, one notices handwritten signatures of the exhibition participants covering parts of the image. As it turns out, the booklet reproduced on the cover of *Working with Feminism* is a copy belonging to one of the participants, Māra Brašmane, who had asked her fellow artists to write their names and addresses on the cover and inside the pages of the booklet (p. 170). Brašmane held on to this tiny piece of messy history, the cover of *Working with Feminism* seems to suggest, so that one day a continuity can be established, however, tenuous.

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