

Feminism Is Politics!

Curated by
Olga Kopenkina

September 28
—
November 23, 2016

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Selected Works

This exhibition is sponsored in part by the Republic of Serbia Ministry of Culture and Information, the Berlin Senate Chancellery–Cultural Affairs Department, and the Swedish Arts Grants Committee's International Programme for Visual and Applied Artists.



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“Revolution will come in a form we cannot yet imagine.”
—Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons” (2013)

“One of the questions we have yet to answer is whether women do want the same things that men have wanted; whether ‘greatness’ in its present form is in fact desirable.”
—Lucy R. Lippard, “Changing since Changing” (1976)

Feminism Is Politics! is an inquiry into what is conceptualized by feminists, lesbians, and queers in the 21st century as new feminism. Breaking up with the liberal feminist traditions established in Western Europe and the United States throughout history, new feminism advocates for a “new genealogy of feminism [...] that includes marginalized but relevant histories, practices, and theories that form and activate new political subjects.”¹ The call for political subjectivization in feminist art dictates a new understanding of how feminist, as well as queer, identity can be rendered useful for the leftist, antiracist, and activist practice. This new understanding includes the awareness of the fact that female and queer/lesbian artists can embody “precarious life”—a life of the body produced and endangered by social and political conditions resulting from globalization and the world’s neoliberal policies. The question feminists around the world ask is: “what are the conditions within global capitalism that inform and reshape feminist concepts, paradigms, and statements in relation to labor, migration, capital, and democracy?”² *Feminism Is Politics!* is centered on cultural and political struggles that queers, lesbians, and marginalized and indigenous people from different parts of the world bring into the feminist movement, and on their attempts to create a feminist platform for the contemporary world—a platform whose goal is to invent new dreams and identify possibilities emerging from the ruins of the global status quo.

Instead of focusing on numerous cases of representations of female sexuality and identity (often objectified by the artists of the ‘90s), the exhibition addresses the feminist position in action within the new millennium’s political paradigm of uncertainty and precarity.³ As many critics argue, economic and political precarization has become a neoliberal instrument of governance that does not make any absolute separation between

center and margin.⁴ Nonetheless, different nationalities, social groups, genders, and classes experience precarization differently. Serbia-born, Berlin-based artist Tanja Ostojić explores femininity as a gender of precarity in her project “Misplaced Women? Marking the City.” In the crowded transportation hubs of the EU cities, Ostojić enacts, and delegates to other female performers, a familiar, everyday activity: packing and unpacking her own suitcase. “Misplaced Women?” signifies both mobility and displacement as constitutive characteristics of the female body. What is a commonplace activity for transients, migrants, and refugees becomes also a political gesture for the itinerant artist who travels the world in order to earn her living. In Ostojić’s series of performances titled “Naked Life,” the theme of dispossession of property, identity, and human rights is taken to a new level. The artist gradually strips herself of all clothing while reading the United Nations Human Rights reports consisting of brutal details of deportations of Roma migrant families from Western Europe. As feminist scholar Suzana Milevska noted, in “Naked Life,” Ostojić creates a female version of Agamben’s notion of “homo sacer,” a “femina sacra,”⁵ which embodies the phenomenon of “bare life,” produced and subsequently brutalized, expelled, and killed by the sovereignty of a capitalist national state.

Like Ostojić, the Romanian artist duo Irina Gheorghe and Alina Popa (a.k.a. Bureau of Melodramatic Research) explore the concept of the body endangered by capitalism. In their video performance “Protect Your Heart at Work,” two female characters dressed in business suits perform a dramatic narrative on the ergonomics of a worker’s heart and emotions. This affective realm previously considered outside of the capitalist manufacturing process is today in need of protection, given the brutal takeover of both body and soul by the ultra-deregulated, postindustrial economy. Purposely hiding the “feminine” nature of precarious work in their business-like appearances, the performers reflect on the fact that political discussions about precarity usually do not differentiate between genders. Nevertheless, it is women who must protect their hearts at work because it is they, more than men, who embody labor, often in the form of poorly paid, temporary, or part-time employment.

Wings of Migrants, a film made by Russian artist Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya (a.k.a. Gluklya) from St. Petersburg, takes on the pro-

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ductive confluence of work and life that signals not only a demand foisted on us by the post-Fordist economy but an entire reinvention of life in a new form. A Russian-speaking female narrator reads a story about a woman from Uzbekistan, who illegally lives in Moscow doing odd jobs, then gets pregnant—leaving her homeless when her boyfriend’s family expels her from their apartment. Despite all of her troubles, she constantly finds new possibilities for remaining in Moscow. Parallel to the reading, a dance exchange between actual migrant workers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, who were invited to act in the film, and young native Russians, is performed in an abandoned factory and back streets. The dance suggests the possibility of a union formed by different ethno-cultural groups amid hostility and conflict. Moreover, employing dance as a communicative tool, *Wings of Migrants* reintroduces precarization as a productive condition capable of forming new social relationships—even if the results seem utopian.

Over the past decade, conversations concerning precarity have increasingly intersected with a search for the commons—public spaces where the precarious might acquire their own political agency. Exploring zones of precariousness and the possibility of political action on a multinational scale, graphic artist Victoria Lomasko has undertaken many trips throughout the former Soviet Union, visiting communities located outside of legitimate institutional and societal boundaries. Graphic reportage “Bishkek – Yerevan – Dagestan – Tbilisi –,” Lomasko’s ongoing project, combines her own illustrated observations with recorded interviews she makes with LGBT people, feminist collectives, prostitutes, and farm workers living in these varied communities. The multitude of female voices narrate a complex relationship that has formed between the marginalized and dispossessed and the rest of the native communities within the former USSR. Through her feminist perspective and choice of characters, Lomasko reveals the disintegration of traditional forms of life, social unities, languages, and intercultural exchanges that were alive in the USSR but disappeared within the rampant Russian capitalism. Lomasko’s courtroom drawings, in which she covers the 2012 trials of female punk performance group Pussy Riot, reveal gender conflicts deeply rooted in the social fabric of contemporary Russia.

Feminist artist who act “on the ground,” outside of the walls of legitimate Western

institutions, understand politics as that of “undercommons.” Stefan Harney and Fred Moten defined “undercommons” as a sort of antipolitics that emerges from the outraged, endangered, indebted population.⁶ Guatemalan artist Regina José Galindo uses her body as a means to address the systematic political violence in Guatemala. In her 2003 performance “¿Quién Puede Borrar las Huellas?” or “Who Can Erase the Traces?” she walked from the Court of Constitutionality to the National Palace of Guatemala, leaving a trail of footprints in human blood to protest the bloody dictatorship of former president Ríos Montt. Once a general in the Guatemalan Army, Montt had been accused of war crimes and genocide against the indigenous population. (He ran, and failed, however, as a presidential candidate in 2003.) Galindo demonstrates that the political field, which we have to enter (literally, by taking steps), is no longer homogeneous; rather it is formed by forces that come from elsewhere, including from inside the diverse and dispossessed body of the undercommons. As “invisible” and “feminine” as this action seemed at the moment of its inception, it attempted to unsettle and open up Guatemala’s enclosed political sphere, and get “politics surrounded” in the face of “repeated, targeted dispossessions.”⁷

Liza Morozova literally enacts “undercommons” in the performance “The Mother Russia,” the artist’s response to Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and invasion in Ukraine in 2014. Naked and blindfolded, with a remote-controlled toy tank strapped atop her head, she moves through a crowd of unassuming visitors during an exhibition opening at Moscow’s contemporary art center Garage. When someone presses a remote button, Morozova, whose body resembles an autonomous drone, receives a mild electrical shock, and the “lethal weapon” becomes its own target of attack. “The Mother Russia” resonates with what Harney and Moten defined as “antagonism from within the surround.” “We are surrounded,” they write, “we must take possession of ourselves, [...] remain in the emergency, on a permanent footing, settled, determined, protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we don’t have, which the settler takes for and as the commons.”⁸ Be it in the annexed Crimea or an oligarch-sponsored cultural institution like Garage, the grim citizens of Russia feel they must arm themselves for protection. And yet, as they walk about blindly hunting for adversaries, it may very well be that they have

already found their target, because they and their enemy are one and the same.

In relation to their own bodies, Galindo, Morozova, "Bureau," and Ostojić are close to what queer and feminist critic Judith (Jack) Halberstam (following postcolonial theorists Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Walter Dignolo) calls "the undoing of self rather than its activation."⁹ They are not feminist subjects who are defined "in terms of self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject." They are subjects who refuse to speak (against colonization or capitalism), who do not assume any agency of power within the colonizing order; rather, they expose the "coloniality of power."¹⁰

According to Halberstam, in postcolonial analysis, the queer subject occupies a space next to the subaltern, offering an alternative to the neoliberal feminist project. The narrative of the film installation *Toxic*, by Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, begins with the negation of the subject, rather than her formation. Mug shots of people of unidentifiable gender, ethnicity, and race, mockingly referencing 19th-century police photos of gay people, flash on a screen in a rhythm set by a click of a camera. The individuals in the shots wear masks and headpieces that transform their identities into wild, antihuman creatures. Two characters—a punk and drag queen—appear on the stage to give monologues on "toxicity," implicating the chemical industry, surveillance, biotechnologies, and media in changing the body into "objects of the political management of living."¹¹ While posing as "antisocial" within the discourse of postcolonial violence and the critique of representations of racial and queer bodies, Boudry and Lorenz, however, envision a new type of queer sociality "formed not by healthy, sane, and self-same bodies claiming wholeness, autonomy, and control, but by toxic bodies," one that is opposed to violence, conflict, and unequal power relations.¹²

The belief that equality and diversity are situated outside the legitimizing spaces, in "elsewhere," is a point of departure for both "Unities" by Ukrainian artist Anna Zvyagintseva, and "Smoking Area" by Swedish feminist collective Yes! Association. Dedicated to German political philosopher Hannah Arendt's famous smoking habit, "Smoking Area" aims to disrupt art institutions' self-positioning in a zone of neutrality outside of political battles. From a space delineated on the gallery's floor to "smoking"—a vaporous metaphor for resisting assimilation and complacency—the

artists read from Arendt's personal letters and hand onions to the audience "to bite and to cry." Combined with the video of the artists' inauguration of the memorial plaque "Smoking Porch" at the actual Arendt's house (what is now the Hannah Arendt Center in Bard College), the performance redefines the boundaries of "the political:" a place where we stand is the place from where we act. On the contrary, "Unities" by Zvyagintseva focuses on the proclivities of political constituencies for disintegration when eclipsed in the rhetoric of nationalist hatred. Following Martha Rosler's feminist approach to "the semiotics of kitchen," Zvyagintseva turns a cooking pot into a metaphor of a closed, isolated space in which the entrapped sound of nationalist riots, "demons of chauvinism and xenophobia" of Ukrainian protests, could be heard.

If Zvyagintseva spots the signs of disintegration within social movements solely defined by national identities, Xicana artist Melanie Cervantes of group Dignidad Rebelde demonstrates, in her own words, a capability to "transform anger into power" through transnational activist networks and organizing. Her printed posters and mural works are conceived within social movements, indigenous in California, Arizona, and Hawaii, as well as the resistance network Black Lives Matter, and concerned with the future of commons endangered by capitalist accumulation and state repressions. She sees a purpose of art activism in not only organizing "on the ground," but also in building a cultural framework that helps shift the hegemony from white male political heteronormality to black, indigenous, feminist, and LGBT political bodies.

A similar paradigm shift takes place in the work by the Argentinian feminist collective Mujeres Públicas, whose name comes from the popular definition "public women" used both for prostitutes and women's movements in Latin America. The collective's actions, graphic works, and performances are often situated in the streets, which historically have been a domain for Argentina's women's movements. Streets are the origins of the work "No Title." Dozens of urban posters plaster the gallery wall revealing sinister images of knitting needles, the symbol of unsafe amateur abortionists operating in a nation where abortions are illegal. Like a graphically visualized feminist shout against an oppressive religious patriarchy, "No Title" addresses the need to protect the endangered female body from devolving into "bare

life.” The posters are paired with a matchbox, which features a quote from Spanish Civil War anarchist hero Buenaventura Durutti written on it. The quote reads: “The only church that illuminates is a burning church.” While suggesting a possibility of direct action, the project also refers to the ontological condition of the undercommons in that being outlawed and fugitive means being opposed to systemic or organizational stability. The state of permanent fugitiveness and dispossession breathes anti-politics into the undercommons.

New feminism does not prescribe a model for action. Rather, it frames the debate for future cultural activism by disrupting social policies on body and sexuality, on immigration and on capital’s attempts at enclosing the commons. All of these affirm the undercommons and seek to surround politics, destroying the false picture of complacency that is imposed on us.¹³ Feminists, queers, and precarious cultural workers struggle for defining the rules of inclusion in political life. Those who get to define them challenge our very understanding of the political itself.

Olga Kopenkina is a Belarus-born, New York-based independent curator and art critic. Her exhibitions and projects include *Lenin Icebreaker Revisited* at NY Austrian Cultural Forum (2015); *Sound of Silence: Art during Dictatorship* at EFA Project Space, New York (2012); *Reading Lenin with Corporations* (2008–2012); *Russia: Significant Other* at Anna Akhmatova Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia (2006); and *Post-Diasporas: Voyages and Missions* at the First Moscow Biennale, Moscow (2005). Kopenkina has contributed to such publications as *Art Journal*, *Moscow Art Magazine*, *ArtMargins*, *Manifesta Journal*, *Modern Painters*, *Afterimage*, and others. She is an adjunct professor in the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, Steinhardt.

- 1 Marina Grzinic and Rosa Reitsamer, introduction to *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions*, “New Feminism is Politics!” Wien, (Löcker, 2008), 13.
- 2 Ibid., 12.
- 3 Isabell Lorey defines precarity as “an effect of specific conditions of domination,” but also as “a productive condition potentially empowering subjectivity for a political action.” Isabell Lorey, “Becoming Common: Precarization as Political Constituting” (*e-flux journal* #17, 2010).
- 4 Isabell Lorey, Ibid.
- 5 Suzana Milevska, “‘Femina Sacra’: Bio-Power and Paradoxes of Humanity in the Art of Tanja Ostojic,” *Integration Impossible?: The Politics of Migration in the Artwork of Tanja Ostojic*, (Berlin: Argobooks, 2009), 225.
- 6 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*.
- 7 Ibid., 18.
- 8 Ibid., 17.
- 9 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 126.
- 10 Judith Halberstam refers to the term “coloniality of power” offered by Walter Dignolo. Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, (Duke University Press, 2011), 126.
- 11 Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in Pharmacopornographic Era*. (CUNY, New York, 2013), 25.
- 12 Antke Engel and Renate Lorenz, “Toxic Assemblages, Queer Socialities: A Dialogue of Mutual Poisoning,” (*e-flux journal* #44, 2013).
- 13 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 19.



Pauline Boudry/ Renate Lorenz, *Toxic*, 2012, installation with with 16mm film/HD; 13 minutes. Performance: Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Werner Hirsch



Bureau of Melodramatic Research, *Protect Your Heart at Work*, 2012, video (20 minutes)



Melanie Cervantes, *Between the Leopard and the Jaguar*, 2015, 9-color screen print, Lennox Archival paper, printed in San Leandro, 11" x 15"

Regina José Galindo, *¿Quién puede borrar las huellas? / Who Can Erase the Traces?*, 2003, Guatemala City. Photo by José Osorio.



Gluklya (Natalia Pershina-Yakimanskaya), *Wings of Migrants*, 2012, video (22 minutes)



Victoria Lomasko, Untitled from the series "A Chronicle of Resistance", 2012, paper, ink, acrylic





Liza Morozova, *The Mother Russia*, 2014, photo documentation of performance. Photo by Irina Ivannikova (Russia)



Tanja Ostojić, "Misplaced Women?" *La Grand Escalier de la Gare du Saint Charles, Marseille*, 2013, performance in the public space/photo series. Production: Préavis de Désordre Urbain & Red Plexus



Mujeres Públicas, *Everything with the Same Needle*, 2003, street poster

YES! Association/ Föreningen JA!, *Hostilities/ Events/Inclusion/ Assimilation/Disruptions and Beginnings*, reading/speech/performance, performed by Malin Arnell, Åsa Elzén, and Annika Ruth Persson, 30 minutes, part of "Smoking Area," 2012, Bard CCS Galleries, NY. Photo by Karl Rabe/ CCS Bard



Anna Zvyagintseva, *Unities*, 2012-ongoing, sound installation



Pauline Boudry/Renate Lorenz
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