

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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Author

ANGELA DIMITRAKAKI

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**FEMINISM, CAPITALISM AND THE ART
FIELD: QUESTIONS ON METHODS,
POLITICS, HISTORY**



**AZKUNA ZENTROA
ALHÓNDIGA BILBAO**

My presentation today is organised with two questions in mind: first, what are the differences between the 1970s and now in how feminism addressed capitalism in relation to art? And, second, what would the contribution of contemporary Marxist feminism in art history be, and especially how this political and methodological framework might begin to make sense of this (fragmented and discontinuous) history of critique? Both questions invite reflections on the relationship between methods and politics and the historical junctures that shape this relationship.

The explicit shift of focus from the concept of patriarchy to that of capitalism in art has coincided with the rise of globalisation in the 1990s and its apprehension as an *economic* paradigm, yet a paradigm where the economy ceases to be merely the economy and becomes a form of biopolitical governance that pursues aggressively and makes the most of intersectional divisions. The data provided by the World Bank and the ILO (International Labour Organisation) is quite devastating, registering formally that women do most of the unpaid or low paid work across the globe, among other aspects of oppression and exploitation.¹ By way of example, nearly 20 years ago, Ursula Biemann's video essay 'Performing the Border' (1999) exposed the use that multinationals made of women at the border of Mexico and the US.

To return to the questions prioritised in this paper, they suggest that I am engaging two *assumptions*:

First, that capitalism is a 'problem' both in relation to art and in relation to feminism, which I understand as a political discourse and practice seeking to end the oppression, discrimination and exploitation of women and, nowadays, 'anyone who feels like a woman', as once put by the feminist art collective Malmö Free University for Women. But oppression, discrimination and exploitation *by whom*? If the world were divided into the neat categories of 'men' and 'women', we could follow, so to speak, the money. And benefits that are as important as money. But since these categories do not stand alone, various factors impact the data and produce complex stratifications, not excluding *the exploitation of women by women* as a lamentable re-scripting of Marx's observation about men: suffice to consider where our garments are made, by whom, and in what labour conditions.

If we move to examine how gender operates as a differentiating axis in a given field, such as 'art', which I do not identify with artworks but with a *practice* claiming a position in, and an affinity to, a range of sites (the economy, culture, social movements, professional contexts, institutions), things become quite complicated. To begin with, and as these **two images** show, this happens *because of the range of activities that sustain 'art'* when defined as above. Somewhere between photographing the (female) cleaners of institutions and the women temping as 'participants' under male authorship in the neo-avant-garde, we begin to grasp the scale of complexity. We also begin to grasp it if we read Frances Stracey's chapter on the women of the Situationist International, where (we read) **Michele Bernstein's** 'waged labour' supported Guy Debord's exodus from wage slavery and investment in the higher pursuit of not art, but, well, liberation. I think that none of these highly successful male artists — Hans Haacke, Allan Kaprow and Guy Debord — set out to specifically exploit, oppress and discriminate against women. In fact, their work is registered as progressive. But despite this, these men became the *beneficiaries* of a structure. They questioned the structure but *not in relation to the position these structure reserved for them as gendered artists*. At this point then, we can say, like Terry Eagleton, that 'the ideology is in the bench' reserved for whites and it is not the fault of the whites to sit on the bench when tired. If the bench is the art field, the reproduction of normative hierarchies rests in the absence of a radical agency, when 'agency' denotes the 'capacity of effecting results', that would encompass *dis-identification from privilege*. That would be a demand for giving up rather than claiming, and it would significantly expand and complexify the remit of 'feminist agency' (so far limited to 'claiming and gaining' and therefore to women). That would be a demand for re-defining agency through the lens of socio-economic realism mobilising a dialectic between having and not having, accepting that, *in a reality structured by antagonisms the field can never get even without the intersection of losing and gaining*. This expansion of feminist agency would, so to speak, send the ball to men's court, extending the responsibility of practicing feminism beyond the gender that typically carries this burden and is often punished for it. I consider the question of feminist agency as immediately relevant to how we research and teach feminism in art schools and related institutions.

¹ 'Women continue to work longer hours per day than men in both paid and unpaid work. In both high and lower income countries, on average, women carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men.' ILO, March 2016, http://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_457267/lang-en/index.htm



This sort of brings me to a brief contextualisation of my **second assumption**: that Marxists feminist art history exists. If it does, it could be only apprehended as a very marginal discourse, despite Marxist feminism doing quite well in other disciplines. A number of reasons for this absence can be brought up, but principal among them is the demotion of *Marxism to a methodology* at the same time as (a) 'the political' was expanding and *diversifying*, becoming as diffused as Foucault's idea of power, and (b) postmodernism's noted 'cultural logic', which permeated this expansion and diversification underplaying the importance of the economy right when neoliberalism was beginning its offensive. A politics (e.g. feminism) can be eclectic towards the methodologies it adopts and, for a number of reasons, the first generation of feminist art historians used aspects of a Marxist methodology but did not feel committed to Marxism. And notably, Marxist art historians never felt committed to feminism. This situation has left the very few of us who identify as Marxist feminists working in, and on, art in a rather schizophrenic condition, our efforts undermined by the proverbial divorce, in progress for decades now, when there is little evidence that the marriage actually took place.

How then can we imagine a Marxist feminist *re-narrativisation of the connection between feminism, capitalism and the art field*? Given the time I have, I can only present two possible entry-points. The first I call 'historical' and the second 'contemporary', in a reductive schema that is most unsatisfactory but which I adopt for analytical purposes.

Entry-point 1, historical: The 1970s. The decade hailed as the beginning and, often, end of 'real' feminism in the art field; the decade that we recently were told to approach as 'fans' (fans of a feminist past); the decade that witnessed the emergence of feminist art history and theory. And yet little has been done in understanding the *contradictions* of this decade, which has been occasionally caricatured in terms of an 'intellectual' British feminism versus an 'accessible' American one (meaning one devoid of traces of Marxism and sulking even at post-structuralism). But was *the principal process (or event) of that decade* that determined how feminism thought about art and capitalism?

Doing my PhD in Britain in the late 1990s, I encountered Mary Kelly as an artist involved in a psychoanalytic critique of the feminine and gender difference. Indeed, I encountered her as the paradigmatic feminist artist precisely because of her methodological approach, which by necessity attended to an abstracted, if explicitly politicised, 'personal'. Psychoanalysis as an artistic methodology adopted by feminists sought to unearth individually – that is, personally- embedded formations, the sum of which exceeded its parts. It attended to processes of personal internalisations that dictated the compulsive attachments to the roles distributed as 'the feminine'. Then one day my supervisor brought me a book called ***Social Process, Collaborative Action: Mary Kelly 1970-1975***. The book included projects that addressed *a collective experience as politics, paying particular attention to class divisions*. My shock at encountering this 'other' Mary Kelly was met by my supervisor's comment: 'yes, something happened in the second half of the 1970s, feminist artists lost their connection with the working class'.

*Arguably, this didn't happen just to feminist artists. There was a general loss of connection between humanities disciplines and class politics at large. But the specificity of feminist political goals meant that this 'rupture' gave a particular character to feminism as a social movement – as feminism in the 1970s art world did assume the characteristics of a social movement. The 2015 show **Not Yet: On the Reinvention of the Documentary and the Critique of Modernism** in Reina Sofia, by Jorge Ribalta (which included very little feminism indeed, despite the central presence of Martha Rosler) demonstrated the rift in the 1970s, with the curator speaking openly in the exhibition catalogue about the defeat of the working class as determining the decade's faultline and subsequent direction.*

Yet this defeat of the working class happened right when women were moving into the work force en masse. And what I want to argue here is that a Marxist feminist art history cannot proceed before elucidating (a) the impact of this defeat on feminist theory, which, in turn, impacted heavily what we receive and teach as feminism in art; and (b) how this defeat becomes a complex issue when seen in light of the fact that women were entering the world of paid work.

On the one hand, the defeat of the working class generated a shift of attention: a hegemonic theorisation of gender oppression that attended to consumption rather than production. The consumption of the sign 'woman', dominant in a visual culture served to a cross-class spectator but also, crucially, signifying 'leisure time' for workers in particular, eventually took over the examination of women's



labour (witnessed in the first half of the decade, at least in parts of the West). Was the consumption of images of women among the benefits offered to male workers when they exchanged the revolutionary aspiration for the safety net of social welfare offered by the capitalist state? We don't know. And if the personal was asserted as political, far less theoretical attention (if any) was paid to how the collective and yet classed experience of the gender division of labour could become the site for a political imaginary in art.

But on the other hand, the argument that feminism merely followed Marxism into its de-politicisation as 'pure theory' and retreat to the academia needs to be re-examined. If Marxism's fate was tied to the diminishing leading/revolutionary role of the male industrial proletariat in that decade, women's increased presence in the work force raises some questions. Women populated the service sector, signaling major changes in production, which of course we are still living through today. Nancy Fraser, Hester Eisenstein and others have recently (2009 and since) discussed the 'use' by capitalism of an increasingly female work force as well as of feminism. But feminist art theory back then did not grasp the significance of these changes — not least for the arts economy as such. For various (unexamined) reasons, Anglophone feminist art theory in the 1970s (and this became the hegemonic voice of feminist art theory) remained also distant from the critique enacted by Italian feminists associated with *Autonomia*, and Griselda Pollock admitted in a 2014 *Art Bulletin* paper that she was only recently introduced to the work of Silvia Federici by a student at the time - Jaleh Mansoor.

Attached to explications of 'the personal is political', feminist art theory prioritised the division between private and public as central, but without adequate attention to how capitalism (as an economy more than a social relation) was already re-shaping the private and the public. The turn to psychoanalysis in the 1970s looked at woman as a private individual, and the goal was to reveal and undo embodiments of 'the feminine'. The problem was that this approach did not exist within a plurality of methodologies, some of which might have attended to the new order of production and the feminization of labour under way. After the mid-1970s, the **most visible artworks** associated with feminism (either by intention or critical reception) did not feature women in factories or offices. They showed women in film code and on TV, women in beds, women on surgical tables, or penetrated by cameras, women and broken mirrors, women in advertising and porn, or even women eating bananas, women at instructive dinner parties. Without in the slightest diminishing the importance of these works (addressing, as is well known, women's consumption as signs), it was only in the 1990s when art turned to the armies of female workers in multinational corporations — I already mentioned Biemann's 1999 *Performing the Border* as setting the tone. Also in the 1990s, as Eastern Europe was experiencing the shock of 'transition', we started seeing work from the region that clearly approached women as laboring subjects that had to perform rather differently than in the Soviet past: **Mare Tralla's** examination of the Soviet role models against the 'looking good' demand of capitalism and **Kai Kaljo's** articulation of the precarious female worker are salient examples. And it was much later when other strands of work from the 1970s began being 'discovered' and re-situated in relation to labour — with a book such as Siona Wilson's *Art Labor, Sex Politics* appearing only in 2015, mine on the gendered work that art performs under global capital in 2013, Jo Applin's analysis of the strike projects of Lee Lozano and Giovanna Zapperi's on Carla Lonzi's drop-out initiated around 2010. And I can't count how many times since the crisis of 2008 I have seen Mierle Laderman Ukeles's *Maintenance works*, in comparison to its earlier invisibility.

Re-opening then the file 'the 1970s' means to ask: why did feminist art theory forget labour right when women were entering the work force en masse? What hegemonic ideology and conception of struggle permitted the association of 'the private' not only with the home as somehow outside labour, but with a private psyche over and above the privatisation of labour? It was also very recently (2013) that *Endnotes* (a 2005 communist collective invested also 'in the question of gender and its abolition'), in their article 'The Logic of Gender', argued that 'the private is the totality of productive and reproductive activities' and thus 'the public' remains as the abstraction filled by the market, 'a space of mediation between private labours, produced independently from one another in private firms owned and operated by private (self-interested) individuals'. This understanding can certainly illuminate women's exodus from the home and march towards the *actually existent art institutions* of the 1970s. Besides various separatisms (the problems of which I have analysed elsewhere), the strategies of visibility and the politics of recognition dictated, and fought for, entry to the *for-profit* art economy. Did this benefit



women? Well, as curator Maura Reilly mentioned on Facebook two days back we see only 2 women artists among the 100 'most collectible' artists and maybe 4 among the '100 top living artists' in 2016.²

The delinking of a critique of gender from a critique of labour that occurred at some point in the 1970s for feminism in art had massive and lasting consequences. It meant that the greater numbers of female art graduates (not to mention the curatorial field), observed for many decades now, would be able to claim *the right to creativity as private labour* without grasping how they participated as a *collective subject* in their own reproduction as 'surplus labour', which is what the capitalist art economy relies on. The 'feminisation of labour', including in the art market (a market of *goods, services and jobs*) is not only a question of values but also a question of numbers. In that sense, we are in urgent need of gendering Greg Sholette's 'dark matter' (2010); to understand how the art economy pyramid works, and why it works, we need to re-connect class composition to gender composition in the art field. And this task cannot be undertaken without grasping how 'agency' (even in its positive, 'claiming' articulation) was shaped through the delinking of these two critiques as witnessed in feminist art theory in the 1970s. For, as Sharzad Mojab reminds us, in the most recent volume on *Marxism and Feminism* (2015), feminism's impact on higher education courses should not go unnoticed. And although art is (predictably) absent from her edited volume, the directions and priorities of feminist pedagogy in art schools, over a few decades now, are not unrelated to what is recognised as 'feminist agency' in art and the processes through which such feminist agency becomes compatible with the dictates of the art market (as defined above) but fails to subvert its dominant trends.

Entry-point 2, contemporary: The common/s, social reproduction and art. I call this entry-point contemporary because it focuses on subjects that dominate *current debates on art*, even if these subjects originate in the past. I will start with an observation: the common, a prevalent political theme in Marxist thought and activism, from Hardt & Negri to Dardot and Laval to Luca Basso's *Marx and the Common* (2015) and others, is conceptualised with little or no attention to the feminist struggle. The exception to this is where the common intersects with another concept: social reproduction. The latter defines a field of critique dominated by feminist voices (women's, mostly). There is a tension between the male-Marxist theory of the common and the female/feminist theory of social reproduction which not only perpetuates the known division - men deal with generality, women with the(ir) specificity- but bears on the shaping of Marxism in art, with regard both to the theorisation of the art field and the interventions that might challenge its exploitative structure.

Limiting the feminist contribution to social reproduction in relation to art means that a 'holistic' analysis of the articulation state-market-the common/s *in relation to the art economy*, which is urgently needed, will again marginalise the crucial question of class and gender composition as a dialectical process. There is hardly any doubt that the 'gift economy' sustaining multiple instances of organising labour and participation in art relies on practices of commoning. However, that many of these practices do not enter the market directly hardly means that they are not important to the market. For many, these practices extend the values of gendered social reproduction to the art field, where a presumed 'labour of love', in Federici's famous phrasing, makes the art world not only stay afloat but becoming a notable sector of the economy overall. It is a sector where 'free labour' is enshrined, even if critiqued, and where large numbers of women have relatively recently been observed, though concentrated at the bottom of the pyramid. Yet, women love art, no question about it – possibly as a formerly forbidden field.

Arguably, it is extremely hard to distinguish between a construction of the common/s and social reproduction in the art field. It is even harder to conceptualise their relationship. I think that, in the art context, adopting the analytical perspective afforded by social reproduction has some advantages: a) it forces a re-examination of productive versus reproductive or even 'unproductive' labour; b) it foregrounds the importance of the gender division of labour; c) it permits the tracing of both (a) and (b) from industrialisation to globalisation that may well generate surprising results (this is a project in which I am personally involved but it is only starting); d) it enables an examination of class, race and gender in relation to the organisation of labour, mainly thanks to the work already done in disciplines other than art history and theory – for example, when Meg Luxton argues about how institutions from the market to the state and the family intersect to this end; e) it permits the identification of moments and subjects of 'crisis' - a term increasingly connected with

² See <https://news.artnet.com/market/top-100-collectible-living-artists-504059> (May 26, 2016)



social reproduction. Neoliberalism has been presented as a 'crisis in social reproduction', and I point you to the *Viewpoint Magazine* in 2015, available online, though George Kaffentzis was writing about it in *The Commoner* already in 2002.

On the other hand, the common articulates a political principle of a future directionality — which is not to be casually dismissed. Being 'anti' is not enough; there has to be a demand that articulates a desire for both dis-identification with capital as a social relation *and* identification with what would replace it. Social reproduction does not offer this vision: it is a category that describes what exists, *not* a political aspiration. That said, the 'common', the commons' and (my preferred term) the slashed common/s, are repeatedly used to describe *practices that already exist* — with the question being, as in a 2013 article by Federici and Kaffentzis, *how* to have 'the commons against and beyond capitalism'. My participation in quite a few art conferences and workshops in the past couple of years (perhaps above all in the Athens Biennial in 2015-16, focused on the common/s) made me realise how widespread is the belief that a world (an art world?) *parallel* to the capitalist web of art institutions can and does exist. Women are taking part in the realisation of this other world, alongside men, often outnumbering them and often in the belief that the 'gender issue' of capitalism is left behind for those engaged in the radical practice of commoning. The very naming of an alternative political principle and site/practice as 'common/s' indicates, apparently, an *overcoming*.

This is not so naïve as it sounds — but only in the first instance: for what is the subject that the common/s introduces if not a 'common subject' constructed as the very antithesis of the divisions that orchestrate subjects as oppressors and oppressed on the capitalist side of the fence? The problem, of course, is that the fence does not exist. If it did, the common/s (*within*, rather than outside) of capitalist relations of production and reproduction would be permitting a *part-time* exodus from such relations. But what these relations permit instead is, at best, a *traffic* between the formal and informal economy of art, the one that is funded and the one that is not, the one created out of income and the wage and the one practices 'free labour'.

This relationship is not symmetrical and reciprocal: in the actually existing art field, we can imagine that the formal economy can support the informal economy: for example, an art occupation can invite to their independent space for a talk the visiting feminist theorist whose travel and fee are paid by the formal economy of that very same city. But the formal economy of art relies on the informal one for two different things: a) the legitimization of its activities as politically valuable, cutting-edge etc, b) the keeping in orbit — that is, keeping *occupied*- art's surplus labour. Many of those populating the informal economy of art are there because they have no access to the wage relation or income through art: their alternative instituting is premised *on their condition of being a surplus* in the economy of art. And the principal relationship between actual and surplus labour, between the employed and the unemployed, is antagonism and competition. This antagonism is what the belief in a fictional 'common subject' (as the beneficiary of common goods) hides from view when the common/s of art is articulated *within* class society, to begin with — also a heavily gendered and racialised society, if we wish for greater accuracy. As I have argued elsewhere, it is no accident that the common and the commons come to the fore in the 21st century, alongside 'the multitude', and other terms, all in the wake of the defeat of the working class, and labour at large (here I point to a Goran Therborn's 2012 article 'Class in the 21st Century', for the *NLR*). Tellingly perhaps, the Federici-Kaffentzis article of 2013, with a section headed 'Commons and Class Struggle', fails to mention the working class or any class. And in her famous article 'Feminism and the Politics of the Commons' (2011, *The Commoner*) Federici limits feminism's participation in the commons to a struggle over social reproduction, but without identifying which classed female subjects would be the beneficiaries of any changes.

The thing is that this presumed 'common subject' is a useful fiction for gender relations too. Overall, what is repeatedly absent from analyses of the common/s is who is the *beneficiary* of either common goods or the common as a political principle. Federici's own history of the commons (in the emergence of capitalism that went hand in hand with women's subordination, in her book *Caliban and the Witch*) lacks such an analysis. And so, the political investment in the common/s is also an ideological one, insofar as it renders invisible *that the shift from exchange to use value does not eliminate the always classed and gendered beneficiary*.

With this in mind, it is imperative for Marxist feminist art theory to review the role that the common/s currently plays in shaping an allegedly radical subjectivity in, and for, art. This cannot but rest on a thorough review of *instituting* — and indeed instituting against capitalism and the gender division of labour that sustains it. The 'institution of the common', which Hardt and Negri consider as a



monstrous and violent prospect and with which they close *Commonwealth* (2009), must be subjected to Marxist feminist analysis, if it is not to remain as abstract as the 'common': a political principle addressing a subject that *cannot* exist under capitalist conditions of production (and reproduction). This is *not* to advocate a new return to micro-politics. I believe that we are done with that, in feminism. On the contrary, what I am arguing is that the common/s introduces a simplified abstraction whereas what we must face is a complex totality. One where all divisions (including those of labour) so far not only ensure the reproduction of capitalism but also the multiplication of divisions both as regards biopolitics and geopolitics. Attending to these processes is imperative for a feminism that has accepted its own splintering into 'feminisms' — a concession barely concealing a feminism in crisis.

On a concluding note

The above reflections outline two entry points to the conundrum 'feminism, art, capitalism'. The first (the historical problem) addresses, in the last instance, the formation of feminist agency and its exclusions. The second (the problem of oppositional praxis, and therefore contemporary) addresses the crisis in such oppositional praxis when the latter fails to confront the question of ideology. This crisis is marked by the gap between an abstract, indeed *impossible* subject in the current reality of production and reproduction and the tendency to pluralise (that is, fragment, divide further) the politics that addresses the specificities of oppression and exploitation. I hold little hope that the explanatory power of feminism as regards the art field and capitalism can increase without a rigorous analysis of this gap — which I see as central in the work that Marxist feminism has to do in art.

