

## Caring in Curating. Transforming Art History: Possibilities and Limits in Practice and Theory

Abigail Solomon-Godeau

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**Electronic version**

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/97959>

DOI: [10.4000/critiquedart.97959](https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.97959)

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

**Translation(s):**

*Caring in curating*, ou le soin dans la conservation. Transformer l'histoire de l'art : possibilités et limites de la pratique et de la théorie - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/97964> [fr]

**Publisher**

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

**Printed version**

Date of publication: 1 December 2022

Number of pages: 19-31

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

**Electronic reference**

Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Caring in Curating. Transforming Art History: Possibilities and Limits in Practice and Theory", *Critique d'art* [Online], 59 | Automne/hiver 2022, Online since 01 December 2023, connection on 16 December 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/97959> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/critiquedart.97959>

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- 1 Although aware of a growing bibliography grounded in feminist theory on the necessity of an ethics of care, prior to reading *Radicalizing Care*, I had never considered its application to curatorial activity. As it happens, care and curating share at least one etymological ancestor in the Latin *curare*, “to care for”, “to look after”, “to cure” and “to heal”. But where this was once limited to the institutional maintenance and exhibition of art objects by museum professionals, curatorial activity since the 1990s has massively expanded. In tandem with the explosive growth of the global art world and its fairs, blockbusters, and biennials, so too has this increased the range of curatorial activities. With particular respect to the curation of contemporary art in all its diversity, this has spawned university courses and degrees, programs in auction houses and museums, specialized journals, a massive bibliography and applications that include all manner of consumer goods and services presented as “curated.” Such is the inflationary scale of its usage that the Canadian art critic David Balzer coined the term “curationism,” whose subtitle, *How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else* indicates its proliferation.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, there are dramatic differences between curatorial ranks, ranging from globetrotting stars at major institutions or their freelance equivalents, and the precarious, poorly paid, or even unpaid labor constituting the bulk of the art world pyramid. But alongside the individual curator who “authors” an exhibition, there have long existed other models for the organization and presentation of art—most notably, activist collectives, artist cooperatives, and grass roots organizations inventing other forms of creation, engagement, and display, such as those participating in the current documenta 15 in Kassel. It is this collectivist, democratic, participatory, non-hierarchical and socially responsible conception of care and curating that informs the theory and practices that feature in *Radicalizing Care*.

- 2 Acknowledging the profoundly unequal conditions that prevail in all sectors involved in the production, the exhibition, and the economics of cultural production, in their collaborative introduction Krasny *et al.* state that an understanding of caring “helps us to understand that the freedom to care and the burden of care are most unequally distributed. Global care injustice and global care discrimination are pervasive and access to caring infrastructures, broadly understood to include housing, health, education, and culture is extremely stratified. [...] Class, gender, race and other categories of difference shape and determine pervasive care inequalities.”<sup>2</sup> These issues are fundamental to feminist theory and practice, of whatever stripe. It is no secret that caregiving has been overwhelmingly provided by the unpaid labor of women within the home and family. Alternatively, when care is provided by health workers, cleaners, and those providing child or elder care, it is drawn from the labor of poorly paid working-class women, often from marginalized, immigrant or other disfavored populations. This gendered division of care in its material incarnations has appeared to sustain the new world order of neoliberalism under the aegis of globalism, but as numerous commentators have observed, even the wealthy nations of the global North are now experiencing a crisis of care, intensified since the Covid pandemic. In this respect, the political theorist Nancy Fraser has argued that this current crisis is inseparable from what she identifies as the third regime of the globalizing financialized capitalism of the present era. “This regime [...] has relocated manufacturing to low-wage regions, recruited women into the paid workforce, and promoted state and corporate disinvestment from social welfare. Externalizing carework onto families and communities, it has simultaneously diminished their capacity to perform it. The result, amid rising inequality, is a dualized organization of social reproduction, commodified for those who can pay for it, privatized for those who cannot—all glossed by the [...] modern ideal of the ‘two-earner family.’”<sup>3</sup> While the long history of the division between productive and reproductive labor has multiple determinations, the distinction between the former—(waged) and the latter (unpaid) labor—has been the linchpin of both capitalist and socialist economies. It is thus one of many strengths of *Radicalizing Care* that it is as concerned with theorizing forms of care as with providing concrete instances of such initiatives emerging in the past few years.
- 3 Among the strikingly expansive projects discussed, rooted in feminist, GLBT, postcolonial and ecological principles, are those oriented to specific care issues such as the access rights of the disabled, the institutional dominance of gay male staff in Berlin’s Schwules (Gay) Museum at the expense of lesbian and queer women, the preservation of a bath house in Gothenburg that Somali women used as a safe space for relaxation and sociability, the reclamation of a rainwater retention basin on the abandoned site of Berlin’s Tempelhof airport, transformed into the pedagogical and ecological Floating University, to mention only a few of the projects detailed in the book.
- 4 Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez’ contribution “Caretaking as (Is) Curating,” is exemplary both for the project itself—her organization of *Contour Biennale 9* in Mechelen, Belgium—but also for her eloquent reflection on how the local and the global, the historical and the contemporary can be mobilized by working directly with its public. “The questions of whom a biennial addresses,” Petrešin-Bachelez writes, “and whether we can find sustainable ways to work on a biennial were a central point of departure... in that respect, the biennial established many meaningful collaborations with local initiatives

and stakeholders who in different ways accompanied or collaborated with the artists and activists in their research and production.”<sup>4</sup> One of the *files rouges* running throughout the *Contour 9* was that of the extractive depredations in the Congo that fueled Western technological progress, including, in the present, the mining of coltan and lithium. Another political outgrowth of the biennial’s activities was the formation of a group of Belgian citizens of Congolese descent mobilized to decolonize public spaces, especially those monuments celebrating Belgium’s colonial past. With its substantial bibliography, thoughtful essays, discursive footnotes, and its diverse range of essayists, *Radicalizing Care* makes an impressive contribution to the discourse within which an ethics, and indeed a politics of care emerges as one of the few alternatives to the multiple crises that we might characterize as the catastrophic consequences of care-lessness.

- 5 To move then from the breadth and urgency of the ethical and political concerns in *Radicalizing Care* to the subjects engaged in *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* puts pressure on the terms “radical” and “critique,” insofar as the stakes for feminism in this arena risk being considered as merely academic. Victoria Horne and Lara Perry’s introduction to their anthology thus seeks to demonstrate how feminist interventions in the discipline may transform a discourse that feminists have long recognized as androcentric, Eurocentric, racist, misogynist, and historically aligned with imperial conquest and ideologies of domination and subordination. There are, however, a number of practical limitations to their inquiry. As they acknowledge themselves, the essays are principally geared to modern and contemporary practices, leaving unaddressed how feminism’s interventions in art history have or have not altered art historical treatments of older and non-Western production. Most of its contributors are based in the UK and consequently the general frame of reference and discourse is Anglophone, excluding what may have been feminism’s influence on Germanophone or other nation’s scholarship. But to my mind, the root of the problem lies within the structures, the nature, and terms of the discipline itself. Since feminist art history’s foundational manifesto (Linda Nochlin’s 1971 “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”<sup>5</sup>), feminists have agreed that an additive approach (add women and stir or add artists of color and stir) is inadequate. Accordingly, the necessity of exposing the ideologies and the histories that have collectively shaped the discipline, and these have, in fact, long been the subject of the field’s feminist critique. Yet fifty years on, it is by no means evident that this has produced a structural transformation deserving of the adjective “radical.” We do well to remember the remit of the so-called social art history that emerged in the UK in the 1970s that sought to develop a materialist and more or less Marxian framework for research and criticism but which stands revealed as no less blind to the determinations of gender, sexual difference, and race within art history than was the scholarship of previous generations. This suggests not only the blind spots of ostensibly critical projects (which surely operate within feminist critique itself), but also, the embedded authority of cultural gatekeepers lodged in both institutions and discourse.
- 6 Symptomatic of art history’s resistance to epistemological challenge has been the emergence of alternatives, such as the recently minted and more ecumenical escape hatches offered by programs or departments in visual studies, cultural studies and the like. These have the advantage of dispensing with the criteria of aesthetic value by eliminating the cultural hierarchies of high and low, the “others” one might say, of connoisseurship. But yet another issue peculiar to the discipline is its imbrication with

other institutions, specifically art markets and museums, both of which *also* produce art histories. Canons, monographs, blockbuster exhibitions as well as notions of individual genius, originality, the belief in the individualistic wellsprings of cultural creation, and, obviously, the conferral of aesthetic value itself are the moving parts of this network, and as such, remain foundational to art history overall.

- 7 The paradox of *Feminist and Art History Now* is that those essays that address practices that may be justly considered radical (*i.e.* Carla Lonzi's repudiation of the art world as such; the various manifestos that call into question the deep structures of "art-as-institution"), activist interventions such as Martha Rosler's *If You Lived Here*, or even the cultural production of indigenous people can be seamlessly inserted into the normative protocols of art historical scholarship as simply new candidates for inclusion, leaving intact its disciplinary premises.
- 8 To subvert or transform the orthodoxies of academic art history from within the discipline would seem to be the intention of *Feminism and Art History Now*. Thus, somewhat optimistically, the editors write: "Exploring how imperialism, colonialism and decolonization have produced the terrain of Euro-American art practice promises a potentially revolutionary reconceptualization of conventional art histories."<sup>6</sup> Revolutionary? Really? There exists already a vast international and multidisciplinary bibliography on these subjects that does not seem to have had dramatic effects on the field.
- 9 But while not discussed in the book, what might be interesting to consider are issues of identification and investment by feminist art historians themselves in their own field of knowledge production. In this respect, Horne and Perry cite Lisa Tickner, writing in 1988: "[...] Feminism cannot *leave* art history. There is still too much to be done with it [...]. This contest begins with the definition of 'art' and 'history.'"<sup>7</sup> Here, is perhaps one of the aporias of academic art history. If one is lucky enough to have a secure post, how can one leave it? If one is among the vast numbers of the academic precariat, where is one to go? For those who have spent years obtaining an advanced degree in art history, identification and investment have psychological as well as professional meanings, perhaps implicit in Tickner's statement. To what extent to these factors influence the desire to preserve (but redeem) the discipline? Unfortunately, like unremunerated curating and all kinds of marginalized labor in all sectors of the art world, the "now" of art history looks more and more fragilized even as it becomes more and more feminized. It seems likely to be increasingly subject to retrenchment, austerity, and defunding than to provide a fertile space for radical transformation. "Transforming" art history for the emancipatory goals of feminism, may well be in our historical moment, as Dr. Johnson described second marriages, the triumph of optimism over experience.

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## NOTES

1. Balzer, David. *Curationism: How Curating Took over the Art World and Everything Else*, London: Pluto Press, 2015
  2. Krasny, Elke. Lingg, Sophie. Fritsch, Lena. "Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating. An Introduction," *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2021, (Academy of Fine Arts Vienna), p. 17
  3. Fraser, Nancy. "Contradictions of Capital and Care", *New Left Review*, no. 100, July-August 2016, p. 99
  4. Petrešin-Bachelez, Nataša. "Caretaking as (is) curating", *Radicalizing Care: Feminist and Queer Activism in Curating*, *op. cit.*, p. 63
  5. Nochlin, Linda. *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? = Pourquoi n'y a-t-il pas eu de grandes artistes femmes ?*, London : Thames & Hudson, 2021
  6. Horne, Victoria. Perry, Lara. "Introduction", *Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 5
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 16
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## AUTHOR

### ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU

**Abigail Solomon-Godeau** is currently working on a retrospective of Sophie Calle for the contemporary art space Cukrarna in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has recently published a review of the Jeu de Paume's exhibition *Chefs-d'Œuvre photographiques du MoMA: la collection Thomas Walther* in *Transbordeurs* (no. 6, 2022).