Curatorial Materialism. A Feminist Perspective on Independent and Co-Dependent Curating

Elke Krasny

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the emergence of a new type of work that was about to radically transform the art world and, maybe even more importantly, how art relates to the world. This transformation concerned the production, distribution, dissemination, study, and reception of art. This emergent way of working in a different way went beyond the then given narrow confines of the art world and was extended to social and political contexts. This work has been identified as independent curating.

With respect to the early history of independent curating, I want to raise the following two points here. Firstly, independent curating was crucial to transforming modern art into contemporary art. Secondly, many of the independent curators who were profoundly shaping this transformation were feminists, active as feminist artists, art historians, activists, thinkers, and public intellectuals. These two points taken together allow us to see, in historical hindsight, that the emergence of feminist curating was crucial to transforming modern art into contemporary art. With this historical knowledge in mind, we need to raise the question: what are the current transformations initiated by feminist and queer-feminist curating whose politics and practices we witness today telling us? Is the new type of work that feminist and queer feminist curating performs today, and which I conceive of to be co-dependent much rather than independent, crucial to an ongoing process of transformation from contemporary art into a not-yet-named art? The term independent points to the relation of a cultural practice, like curating, to political and economic struggles and thought, including feminism. Terms like modern and contemporary point to the relation between cultural practices, like art, and their histories as produced via their respective academic disciplines such as art history/art histories. The questions raised here concern the complex relations between practices, theories, and historiographies. They extend to political and economic struggles and thought and ask how theorization within and through practices such as curating moves forward? Equally, these questions raise concerns as to the epistemologies and narratives produced via academically disciplined knowledge production. And, what could a theoretical framework be that makes it possible to approach such questions in a critically nuanced way that is most sensitively alert to historical and present transformation emerging through practice, and in particular curatorial practice?

Curatorial Materialism

Let me suggest at this point that a curatorial materialism would allow for practicing theory in such a way as described above. A materialist approach ensures awareness for the material interactions and their inherent political and economic
struggles. A curatorial approach takes into account relatedness to the world as a way of producing, including the production of new epistemologies and emergent histories. My suggestion of a curatorial materialism is owed to the concept of museum materialism introduced by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry. In 2013, Dimitrakaki and Perry called for the critical practice of a “museum materialism: a politically mindful, theoretically alert investigation of feminist confrontations with the complex actuality and conditions of art-world institutions.” Following their call for a museum materialism, I suggest here a curatorial materialism as a critical investigation into the conditions and means of curatorial production, including self-organised and self-initiated productions, along with the access to infrastructures and institutions, the relations between curators, artists, technicians, builders, educators, intellectual producers, government officials, sponsors, donors, and supporters, and the engagement with the public. I see thinking from a position of relatedness as central to curatorial materialism. As I pointed out earlier, early feminist curatorial practices transformed the way in which art relates to the world. It is precisely this practice of relatedness, and the way the practice of curating transforms the ways in which these relations are shaped and allowed to happen, to which curatorial materialism has to be theoretically astute.

Feminist Independent Curating
I will now briefly discuss three different models of feminist independent curating from the late 1960s and early 1970s. I discerned these feminist examples of models that can be understood to have transformed the conditions of production and distribution of art in the work of Lucy Lippard, Ida Biard, and VALIE EXPORT. Between 1969 and 1974, American art critic Lucy Lippard realized a series of Number Shows, titled after the number of people living in the cities where the shows took place. In 1972, Zagrebian art historian Ida Biard initiated La Galerie des Locataires in her Paris apartment with its window doubling as exhibition venue. In 1975, Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT realised the exhibition MAGNA. Feminism: Art and Creativity. A Survey of the Female Sensibility, Imagination, Projection and Problems Suggested through a Tableau of Images, Objects, Photographs, Lectures, Discussions, Films, Videos and Actions. The project ran counter to disciplinary categorizations and connected visual art, film, poetry, music, and also a theory through a symposium and lectures. These curatorial models re-defined the use of infrastructures and institutions just as much as they created new public approaches to art-making on both a conceptual and a political level. Art historical scholarship, and in particular feminist art historical scholarship, has recently begun the historical project of mapping out and analysing the changes owed to feminist curating. Much of this analysis has foregrounded the following aspect of the curatorial work—the exhibitions through which the changes regarding the conceptual, im/material, and political dimensions of art were shown. What needs more future analysis is how feminist curating changed the way art relates to the world and how the transformation of the conditions of production and distribution and a feminist politics of defining this transformation is paramount to transforming these relations. In what follows, I will outline the contours of a curatorial materialist analysis of Lippard’s, Biard’s, and EXPORT’s practices with a specific focus on production and distribution and its politics of access to resources, infrastructures, and institutions.

The curatorial model of Lucy Lippard’s Numbers Shows 1969–74 relied on the creation of networked relations between small-scale institutions, different venues in cities, and the contributing artists. Lippard’s strategy effectively redefined the relation between the work of curating and the work of art-making. The Number Shows’ catalogues of 4 x 6 index cards attest to this, often citing instructions by the artists as to how the curator was to execute the art work on site. This strategy
effectively transformed the conditions of production with regard to the division of labour between the work of the artist and the work of the curator. Here, the curator appears as the one who produces and makes the artwork in order for it to become public via the exhibition format. The status of the artwork was also effectively challenged. Very often the work was ephemeral and only existed on site for the duration of the exhibition. “The number shows were low-budget and for the most part physically easy to transport, in part out of necessity, given the dictates of the smaller, sometimes marginal and generally under-funded institutions where they took place. […] The majority of artworks she solicited were, if not easily transportable, easily produced on-site at the instruction of the artists and often in their absence. The works were frequently ephemeral and intended to be dismantled after the exhibition.”

Even though one could suggest that this strategy of working is solely due to the small budgets available at the institutions with whom Lippared collaborated, I argue here that working in such a way is a conceptual strategy that transformed the relations between curator and artist and rendered them transparent as division of labour relations. Lippard worked with small-scale or marginal institutions and showed the artworks in a number of venues spread over the cities in which the exhibition took place. The Numbers Shows reveal a profound understanding of how material and immaterial elements are assembled through logics of production and the division of labour. The title does not refer to the number of artists involved or to the budget figures. Rather, the title refers to the number of inhabitants in each of the cities where the respective exhibition venues were located: 557,087 (Seattle), 955,000 (Vancouver), 2,972,453 (Buenos Aires), and c. 7,500 (Valencia). This demonstrates that sites, and this includes institutions, were not only conceived of as physical spaces, but as spaces constituted by social relations. By referring to a city via its number of inhabitants, its potential public, a city is read in its social production of space. It is the people who are, who make Seattle, Vancouver, Buenos Aires, or Valencia. The choice of title clearly points out that Lucy Lippard’s feminist curatorial strategy understands the relations enabling access to institutional resources and their infrastructures, that is, as relations to people who produce these institutions.

Ida Biard’s La Galerie des Locataires presents a curatorial model based upon resource autonomy and the self-definition of the conditions and distributions of production. Biard redefined the relation between curator and exhibition space and, by extension, the division of labour between curator and artist. By declaring her own apartment, the space that made it possible for her to live and work in Paris, as the space that made it possible to support the communicating of the works of others, Biard shared her spatial and infrastructural resources. The gallery’s motto read as follows: “The artist is anyone whom others give the opportunity to be an artist.” Biard’s curatorial approach made conceptual use of the infrastructure of the postal service. The address of her private apartment in Paris was declared the destination for mail from artists practicing in different parts of the world. What arrived by mail was then carried out by the curator. “Artists from all over the world were invited to send their works by mail, to be exhibited in the window of Biard’s apartment, or realized, according to artists’ instructions, in public spaces of different cities, and in the framework of various exhibitions and projects.” In 1976, Ida Biard used her space and the credentials of her past practice to demonstratively go on strike. She chose to discontinue her curatorial services in order to express her dissatisfaction with the “current system of the art market.” Her own apartment and its postal address had provided the means for the production and distribution of art. The very same resource that she had made available within the art-context through her curatorial practice then became a resource for going on strike by taking this resource out of the production and distribution of art.
VALIE EXPORT’s exhibition MAGNA is a curatorial model based upon inserting feminist practice into the hegemonic art world by using its existing institutions and infrastructures, but on one’s own feminist terms. The MAGNA exhibition project introduced the feminist artist as curator and as contemporary art historian, effectively redefining the relations between curating, art-making and art history writing. In 1972, EXPORT had written a manifesto for women’s art with the title *The Future of Women is the Future of Art History*. Her curatorial project attests to her manifesto’s goal of defining the future (of) art history through art produced by women. The curatorial strategy employed for MAGNA relied on finding an institution ready to host an independently conceived of and curated international feminist group show. EXPORT set out to find a well-established and prominent hosting institution. She describes her work, including her correspondence and her travels to secure funding and an exhibition space, as follows: “I had already developed the concept for the exhibition in 1972. An international exhibition was planned. And I was travelling around in 1972. Looking for other places for the exhibition, such as the Lenbachhaus in Munich or somewhere in London. I travelled around quite a bit, and there was also a lot of correspondence about it. The standard answer was, ‘Very interesting, but who would be interested in it?’”

MAGNA was eventually shown at Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Vienna, in the rooms that since 1923 had been the Neue Galerie run by Jewish gallerist Kallir-Nirenstein and which, beginning in 1954, came under the directorship of Monseigneur Otto Mauer, who dedicated the space to avant-garde art. Using the gallery institution and its infrastructures, EXPORT’s curatorial strategy firmly inscribed feminist art practices in the avant-garde tradition and introduced them as the avant-garde of contemporary art-making.

The examples given here can only serve as an introduction to a comprehensive curatorial materialist study of early feminist independent curating. Much of the recent feminist art historical research and theoretical analysis on early feminist independent curatorship has paid very close attention to inscribing this work into the emerging body of scholarly work on the histories of curating. This scholarly work allows us to understand how the work of feminist independent curators like VALIE EXPORT, Lucie Lippard, and Ida Biard was central to ushering in the shift from modern art to contemporary art, in particular regarding the transformations of the conceptual, im/material, and political dimensions of the artwork. Yet, much less attention has been paid to how the feminist notion of independence may have impacted the shaping of the type of work that led to the establishment of independent curating at the time. The idea of independence, in particular the quest for economic and political independence, is part of feminism’s legacy. How this legacy informed the notion of independent curating warrants further analysis. Therefore, what I have elaborated here is to be understood as a research outline for a comprehensive curatorial materialist study of independent curating, with a particular, yet not exclusive, focus on feminist curatorial projects, and a focus on the question of how feminist economic and political thought on independence informed the concept of independent curating that ushered in the transition from modern art to contemporary art.

**Feminist and Queer Feminist Co-Dependent Curating**

I now wish to complicate the notion of independence, and I will do so by presenting some of my current research on feminist and queer feminist curatorial collectives. The examples chosen include the collective practices of *Red Min(e)d* and *Queering Yerevan*. Seen through a feminist curatorial materialist perspective, the practical and theoretical work of *Red Min(e)d* and *Queering Yerevan* attests to their profound awareness of the human and non-human co-dependencies in the work of curating.
Red Min(e)d is self-identified as a “feminist curatorial collective” active with(in) and beyond the post-Yugoslav space. Starting from shared experiences of transitionality from the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia to post-socialist globalisation, and based upon shared beliefs in curating feminist knowledge, friendship, and solidarity, the group started Red Min(e)d as well as their ongoing Living Archive project, which began in 2011. The four members, Jelena Petrović, Katja Kobolt, Danijela Dugandžić Živanović, and Dunja Kukovec, come from different backgrounds that include feminist theory, contemporary art, cultural production, and activism. They live in different places: Ljubljana, Sarajevo, Belgrade, and Munich.

“In the beginning of the Living Archive [...] we agreed that whatever happens we will focus on LOVE, on the politics of love. Putting FRIENDSHIP and LOVE first and before all misunderstandings, disagreements, and problems was the best thing we could do for us, for the Living Archive and for all the people involved in the process.” They practised the Living Archive together with a number of activists, artists, authors, curators, and scholars in art venues in cities like Zagreb, Sarajevo, Vienna, or Stockholm. They not only situated pasts, presents, and futures via feminist durationality, but also produced and shared solidary knowledge on women’s art and feminist art in the post-socialist post-Yugoslav situation. They established relationships of trust and friendship with the people involved. The Living Archive is an exhibition laboratory and a public living archive with an Audio/Video booth that documents and presents live artist’s talks, discussions, and interviews, the Perpetuum Mobile with a growing collection of video and other media art, and the Reading Room where one can fill out the feminism and art questionnaire. Red Min(e)d not only make their working relations transparent, they equally make public aware of their embodied, lived and felt precarious working conditions. “What we have known since the first edition of the Living
Archive is that most artists, curators, and authors, just like each one of us, have no salaries, no health insurance, have no savings, have no studios, no security, and no plans for future. They produce hungry, tired, love sick, homesick, lonely, with friends, using the equipment and skills of their friends and giving their lives, time, and energy to produce art knowing that most of the people around them believe that art is just a commodity.16

In 2013, Red Min(ed) were nominated as curators of the prestigious October Salon. Initiated in 1960 by the City of Belgrade, the Salon is the oldest and most prestigious institution of contemporary visual art in Belgrade. Red Min(ed) inserted the Living Archive into the October Salon. “In June 2013, when we got appointed as the curators of the 54th October Salon […] we searched for a public museum or a gallery in Belgrade that would be big enough to host over 40 artistic positions, have at its disposal an operating license to be able to welcome the public, be open and available in autumn and have heating and electricity in the whole building.”17 They found none. They decided that the 54th October Salon would take place in the former KLUZ department store and factory, originally built as a military salon, currently owned by Zepter. They knowingly risked of being accused of co-optation or capture. The exhibition No One Belongs Here More than You tested, and resisted, used, and subverted, the precarious space of a so-called private-public partnership afforded within the conditions of “neoliberal predatory capitalism and aggressive Orthodox Christianity.”18 Red Min(ed) exposed their dependence on available spaces and resources. They chose to radically expose this co-dependence as part of their feminist curatorial practice under the precarious present conditions.

Red Min(ed) state that their work is not about changing the “(art) world”. What they aim to do is “to build an emotional space for processing what we feel matters most. […] We have been working on the basis of solidarity and consensus. We are four and we are constantly shifting power between us […] we have been building a truly safe space of belonging.”19 During the October Salon exhibition, to make manifest the labor of art together with the labor of curating, “… the 54th October Salon showed the labor, the work behind each artwork, the tears, the feminist agendas, the sociality, and the affect as well as the living in the Living Archive.”20

Queering Yerevan is self-described as “a collaborative project of queer and straight artists, writers, cultural critics, and activists to be realized within the framework of the QY collective. It takes as its point of departure concrete mnemonic experiences of concrete queer artists in a specific time and space: Yerevan, 2000s.”21 Starting from shared experiences of transitionality from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) to the Republic of Armenia, marked by post-Soviet globalisation, exchanges with the Armenian diaspora, conditions of prevailing homophobia and patriarchy, and the powerful influence of the Armenian Orthodox church, the collective of Queering Yerevan, originally active under the name WOW, Women Oriented Women, began to work in 2007. In the absence of infrastructure readily available for the production, distribution, and reception of contemporary art in Yerevan, the three core members—Arpi Adamyan, Shushan Avagyan, and Lusine Talalyan—organize and provide infrastructures for artistic production and public exchanges. They put together events, exhibitions, happenings, film screenings, workshops, run a blog, and publish books. They apply for or crowdsource funding. Taking all these material and immaterial, emotional and cognitive labours together, they curate. Coming To You To Not Be With You was their first exhibition. In 2008, they opened the garden of Zarbuyan 34 as the physical site for the exhibition and as a gathering space for connectivities and exchanges with other artists, activ-
ists, curators, theorists, and with the audience. "Since our group consists of people working in different genres and with different mediums, one of the main objectives of the group is to be affected by each other's issues and be influenced by each other's aesthetics and methods, ideas and practices: to see how our work can change in the process."22

In their first published book, *Queered: What's To Be Done With Xcentric Art*, they combine experimental, poetic, and theory-based writing with the e-mail correspondence that both instituted and constituted the formation of the loose, local, and diasporic network of queer and feminist Armenian artists and intellectual producers active around the QY collective. The book exposes the potentialities, contradictions, and conflicts inherent in the affective labour of curating-as-caring. Filled with debates, conflicts, and emotions, it also makes public the work of funding applications.23 Angela Harutyunyan, art historian and curator, who is part of the Armenian diaspora, describes QY’s first exhibition: "What I had in mind was to recuperate this collective experience of labor, precisely the experience of producing art as a laborious collective process, which resulted in an intersubjective exchange between the participants in terms of constructing relationships, strengthening and rearticulating friendships."24 She emphasizes having experienced "dissensus" rather than "consensus" and describes the exhibition as "attempts of subjectivization and its very failure."25

The book not only mixes different formats of writing, but also the languages and alphabets of Armenian and English. Therefore, the book itself can be understood as a living archive—to borrow the term from the practice of Red Min(e)d—and, paradoxically, even though a book is conventionally considered a finished and finalized product, as an open-ended space for affective labour, queer feminist durationality, and the sharing of knowledge in transnational solidarity with each other and with future readers. The book crosses between the private and the public, between the here and now, the there and then, between Yerevan and the Arme-
opian diaspora. The book also includes “a two-year conversation” that took place on a list server via e-mail. Curating-as-caring also means taking care of fleeting fragments of solitary knowledge production, of making the commitment to transition from a list server to print, and to endure the conflicts arising within this affective labour. “The goal is to archive a two-year conversation that has been most productive to us, in various ways—if not collectively, then alternatively, individually and otherwise. This ‘unspace’ has been the most real space and it’s created possibilities. We need a record of that, not in the form of a pdf, or a blog, not in the form of censored and cut up pieces, but boldly, in boldface, on paper, thick and heavy, as our conversations have been.” The e-mails fill the printed pages with affective relations, conflicts, desires, identifications, and disillusionment. “That is I don’t want anything I wrote to the listserv to be published. […] Decisions should be made collectively and the needs and concerns of all should be taken into account.” “I agree, the book is open-ended, like you said, at least for me it is.” Queering Yerevan build their own support structures and platforms of sharing their work, be it in a garden as a temporary exhibition venue, or via a listserv or in a book. Equally, they make public their co-dependency within their own community as well as from funding bodies or other supporters. They show that their work emerges through co-dependencies.

Too Early to Conclude

The feminist and queer feminist collectives I have described here make temporary use of existing art infrastructures and/or establish self-initiated, self-sustained, changing, or mobile infrastructures such as a garden, a blog, a book publication, or an archive on wheels. By way of making public their dependence on spatial, infrastructural, economic, and affective resources, they point out that the term “independent” actually conceals that curatorial work is constituted by relations and always dependent upon the exchange and collaboration with other human and non-human actors. Such curatorial work relies on the contributing work of artists, archivists, historians, intellectuals, researchers, technicians, theorists, and, in some cases, on many other museum workers, funders, or government officials. It equally depends on economic, material, infrastructural, institutional, and technological resources. The feminist and queer feminist collectives whose work I presented here establish such material and immaterial infrastructures as part of their work, which enables them to also continue their work and their exchanges with many others. These opened-up physical or digital spaces are understood as emotional spaces, discursive spaces, and spaces of emerging knowledges. Theirs are responses to hegemonic conditions of the globalised art world context, not altering them, but creating within them material and emotional spaces of feminist and queer feminist solidarity. Curatorial materialism allows us to understand that these collective practices are, in fact, new forms of co-dependent curating. Feminist independent curating was part of paving the way from modern art to contemporary art. It is too early to conclude what name will be given to the kind of art that is currently in the making through feminist and queer feminist co-dependent curating.

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Notes
6 The following publications attest to this emerging field of scholarship: the 2006 n.paradoxa special issue on Curatorial Strategies, the 2006 essay “Issues in Feminist Curation: Strategies and Practices” by Katy Deepwell, the 2010 essay “How to Install Art as a Feminist” by Helen Molesworth, the 2010 volume of Feminisms is Still Our Name: Seven Essays on Historiography and Curatorial Practices, edited by Hedlin Hayden and Sjöholm Skrubbe, the 2013 Politics in a Glass Case. Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry, the 2013 Working with Feminism: Curating and Exhibitions in Eastern Europe, edited by Katrin Kivimaa, the 2013 Women’s: Museum. Curatorial Politics in Feminism, Education, History, and Art, edited by Elke Krasny and Frauenmuseum Meran.
10 ibid.
12 For example: In 1898 Charlotte Gilman Perkins wrote the book Women and Economics – A Study of the Economic Relations Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution. In it, she speaks of women’s economic independence as key to the improvement of marriage, motherhood, domestic industry, and racial improvement.
In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir’s Le Deuxième Sexe appeared, in which she devotes an entire chapter to “La femme indépendante”. In her 1963 book, The Feminine Mystique, Betty Friedan stipulated that women’s full identity and freedom is linked to economic independence. Marxist feminist Silvia Federici describes the
need to make oneself independent as follows: “The Second World War was important for the development of feminism in Italy because it marked a moment of rupture of the relation of women to the State and the family, because it made women understand that they needed to make themselves independent, that they could not put their survival in the hands of men and the patriarchal family”.


13 Red Min(e)d, “Production in times of trouble,” in Red Min(e)d (Jelena Petrović and Katja Kobolt, Danijela Dugandžić Živanović, Dunja Kukove ) in collaboration with Jelena Vesić, eds., No One Belongs Here More Than You. The Living Archive: Curating Feminist Knowledge. 54th October Salon, Cultural Center of Belgrade, Belgrade, 2014, p. 203.

14 Ibid.

15 My description is based upon a number of different websites containing information on Red Min(e)d’s Living Archive, such as: http://www.vbkoe.org/2012/09/28/the-bring-in-take-out-living-archive--vbkoe-edition/?lang=en (last accessed in March 2016), http://minainstitute.wordpress.com (last accessed in March 2016) and https://bringintakeout.wordpress.com/category/news/page/3/ (last accessed in March 2016)

16 “Production in times of trouble,” p. 204.

17 Red Min(e)d, “Where and what is a museum?”, in Red Min(e)d (Jelena Petrović and Katja Kobolt, Danijela Dugandžić Živanović, Dunja Kukove ) in collaboration with Jelena Vesić, eds., No One Belongs Here More Than You. The Living Archive: Curating Feminist Knowledge. 54th October Salon, Cultural Center of Belgrade, Belgrade, 2014, p. 28.


19 Red Min(e)d, “No one belongs here more than you,” in Red Min(e)d (Jelena Petrović and Katja Kobolt, Danijela Dugandžić Živanović, Dunja Kukove ) in collaboration with Jelena Vesić, eds., No One Belongs Here More Than You. The Living Archive: Curating Feminist Knowledge. 54th October Salon, Cultural Center of Belgrade, Belgrade, 2014, p. 15.


21 http://queeringyerevan.blogspot.co.at, accessed 03-06-2016


23 Timothy D. Straight, Norwegian Honorary Consul in Armenia responds to a funding request as follows: “While the issue of sexual minorities is an important one for Armenia, there were so many applications on so many pressing issues that all of the could not be chosen, unfortunately.” (Queered: What’s to be done with XCentric Art?, p. 247.)

24 Ibid., p. 200.
25 Ibid., p. 201.
26 Ibid., p. 318.
27 Ibid., p. 321.
Elke Krasny is Professor of Art and Education at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Her work as a curator, cultural theorist, and writer focuses on architecture, urbanism, politically conscious art practices, and feminist historiographies of curating. Krasny holds a Ph.D. in Fine Arts from the University of Reading, Department of Art, Research Platform for Curatorial and Cross-disciplinary Cultural Studies.

In 2016 she taught at the Post Graduate Program on Postindustrial Design at the University of Thessaly, Volos; 2014 City of Vienna Visiting Professor at the Vienna University of Technology. In 2012 she was Visiting Scholar at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montréal. In 2011 she was Visiting Curator at the Hongkong Community Museum. Recent curatorial works include On the Art of Housekeeping and Budgeting in the 21st Century, curated together with Regina Bittner, Suzanne Lacy’s International Dinner Party in Feminist Curatorial Thought at Zurich and Hands-On Urbanism. The Right to Green which was presented at the 2012 Venice Biennale. Her 2015 essay Growing the Seeds of Change was included in Jordan Geiger’s volume Entr’Acte, Performing Publics, Pervasive Media, and Architecture. She co-edited the 2013 volume Women’s: Museum. Curatorial Politics in Feminism, Education, History, and Art, the 2012 volume Hands-On Urbanism. The Right to Green and the 2008 volume The Force is in the Mind. The Making of Architecture.