

## Gathering Feminist Resisters. Curating Salons and Dinners

Elke Krasny

Histories and theories of curating is burgeoning. Practicing curators have been on the forefront of defining the contours of this project of writing curating's histories and theories. Curators have established this new field of study that spans museum studies, the contemporary art world, and includes academic disciplines such as art history, architecture history, visual studies, sociology, philosophy, gender studies, black studies, political thought, and history of consciousness, to name but a few. It is impossible to list here all the curators who have contributed to this project of curating's histories and theories. Some much referenced positions include Hans Ulrich Obrist, Paul O'Neill, Beatrice von Bismarck, Dorothee Richter, Amelia Jones, or Maura Reilly.

From the very beginning feminist curators have been part of shaping this intellectual project. Working from different theoretical perspectives, including post-Derridean and queer feminist approaches like Amelia Jones, empirical sociological strategies of collecting data with regard to the gender of artists represented in exhibitions or museum collections like Maura Reilly, or a Lacanian focus on the symbolic order like Dorothee Richter, feminist critiques have privileged the exhibition format as it represents gendered power relations and gendered economies under patriarchy. The exhibition has been central to constituting the object of knowledge in curating's history and theory. Feminist inquiries have scrutinized the violence of exclusion, in particular the gendered, classed, and racialized exclusions owed to the imperial-colonial entanglements of the exhibition format and the "epistemic violence" of the modern institutions of the museum and the academic discipline art history.<sup>1</sup> Yet, interestingly enough, little attention has been paid to formats other than the exhibition and to methods and politics of working, as for example in feminist activism, that, as I argue here, have also informed curatorial labor.

The purpose of this essay is to expand the feminist history of curating beyond the exhibition paradigm by introducing "the conversational complex".<sup>2</sup> The aim is to begin to unpack a number of connected concerns: how the gendered idea of modern

citizenship informed the modern institution of the modern national museum; how spaces other than the public space of the museum, such as the domestic territory of private homes, resisted such gendered silencing and gave rise to the conversational complex; how gathering subjects together in conversation allows for the emergence of radical aesthetic and political subjectivity; how feminist activism provides lessons for feminist and queer feminist curating. Gathering is an interesting term in this context as it means both to assemble and to convene, that is to collect from different places and to cause to come together. Gathering as both the activity and the result of curating allows to include both the exhibition and the conversation and to work out their different histories of political consciousness. My interest as a curator and a scholar is at once historical and contemporary, theoretical and practical. Such a speculative feminist genealogy of curating conversations seeks to contribute to an expanded history and theory of curating just as much as to an expanded practice of curating today including connections to the women's movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with its new forms and models of contemporary feminist activism.

### The Conversational Complex in Curating

Even though contemporary curating has witnessed a conversational turn in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, curating conversations has not yet been fully included in the histories and theories of curating. An early and prominent example for this conversational turn in contemporary curating is documenta X curated by Catherine David in 1997. On the occasion of documenta X David conceived of a program that she named »100 Days - 100 Guests«. <sup>3</sup> The press release at the time drew attention to the fact that the curator would be present for the entire period of 100 days in order to welcome personally all or her invited guests. "Every evening at 7:00 Catherine David will welcome one or more guests. Following a presentation of ca. 40 minutes, the audience will have the opportunity of talking to the guests and the documenta team"<sup>4</sup> The press release emphasized that documenta, this large-scale international exhibition, which takes place in Kassel, Germany every five years, "is not not merely an exhibition of contemporary art; it is a cultural event."<sup>5</sup> The press release emphasized that these statements, discussions and conversations were "not only supplementing the exhibition but leading beyond it, encircling it from a more objective distance, departing from its

horizon, necessarily limited to three-dimensional space.”<sup>6</sup> The arguments from the press release published on the occasion of documenta X that describe conversation-based formats as encounter or exchange constitutive to a cultural event beyond an exhibition are useful to my purpose here.

The privileged position of the exhibition in analysis is tied to critical museology as it emerged during the 1990s. The importance of the exhibition format is owed to Tony Bennett’s influential 1995 study *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*, drawing heavily on Foucault and Gramsci, with its introduction of the exhibitionary complex.<sup>7</sup> “I suggest that there was in fact a historical conversational complex analogous to the exhibitionary complex which has never been fully investigated.”<sup>8</sup> As I have worked out in a 2017 essay titled ‘The Salon Model: The Conversational Complex’ the difference between the exhibitionary complex and the conversational complex is of importance to a political theory of curating and to the politics of curating understood as a practice. Via Michel Foucault, the political theory of Jeremy Bentham was important to Bennett’s theorization of the exhibition organizing the objects for public inspection and governing their display along the axis of hegemonic power structures. Jeremy Bentham is equally useful to understanding the conversational complex. “When a number of persons (whom we may style subjects) are supposed to be in a habit of paying obedience to a person, or an assemblage of persons ... (whom we may call governor or governors) such persons (...) are said to be in a state of *political society* ... When a number of persons are supposed to be in the habit of conversing with each other at the same time that they are not in any such habit as mentioned above, they are said to be in a state of *natural society*.”<sup>9</sup> While exhibitions have historically been the expression of a vertical axis of power with objects, and by extensions subjects, being governed, “what he [Bentham] calls ‘conversation’ is constitutively antithetical to the vertical axis power along which are arranged the notions of obedience, the disciplinary rotations of governmentality.”<sup>10</sup> In political terms, curating conversations is therefore based on “the condition of horizontal, direct, or immediate relationality”.<sup>11</sup>

The Museum and the Ritual of Modern Citizenship

In historical terms, the beginnings of the modern museum date back to the eighteenth century with first and paradigmatic example the Louvre in Paris. In the historical period, when objects of value that had been amassed in imperial collections were gathered together for public display in museum exhibitions, the domestic realm was used by women to host salons and to gather together subjects in conversation. While the first gave rise to the exhibitionary complex which links to the political concept of governmentality with the curator being understood as the governor of objects, the latter gave rise to the conversational complex which links to the political concept of horizontality or self-governance with the curator as the carer for conversations. The domestic realm as a site of such a civic ritual of conversation, at once aesthetic and social, artistic and political, is all the more of interest as the museum, one of the most important new institutions of modernity, was closely linked to what art historian Carol Duncan has identified as practicing “the ritual of citizenship”.<sup>12</sup> For the purpose here to work out the importance of curating conversations to feminist resistance, it is important to remember that at its very inception the deep structure politico-philosophical idea of citizenship as it was developed during the French Revolution was gendered and based on the exclusion of women. In order to develop her argument Duncan uses the Louvre as the paradigmatic example to explain the importance of the public museum, in particular the public art museum, to practicing citizenship. Other museum scholars, such as historian Andrew McClellan, have also observed that the opening of the Louvre to the public during the French Revolution gave rise to celebrating citizenship through culture. The politico-philosophical concept of citizenship was linked to the ideas celebrated in the aesthetic principles of a common culture specific to citizenship and the nation state as exhibited in the new institution of the public art museum. “The perception of collective ownership helped ... to confer on the citizen ‘a national character and the demeanor of a free man’”, writes McClellan in his monographic study on the formation of the institution of the Louvre museum.<sup>13</sup> Such a celebration of the free man in the public space of the museum renders the public museum a challenging and unsettling institution for women. In 1793, the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* had defined the idea of the citizen through a body gendered male. Citizenship was conceived of as corporeal. “Women could not be citizens. The citizen could not be imagined as woman.”<sup>14</sup> The ritual of citizenship therefore

celebrated the free man not in a metaphorical sense, but in a corporeal sense. Even though women were included in the public space of the museum, they were not included as free woman, not as citizens. They were included as onlookers, as witnesses to the celebration of androcentric citizenship culture marked by the exclusion of women as citizen-subjects.

### Female-Led Culture of the Salon

In parallel to the formation of the of the museum with its ritual of citizenship and its celebration of viewing public culture constitutive to the dominant object of knowledge understood as a given public culture, the female-led culture of the salon emerged in the domestic territory. The salonière who hosted guests in her home and made it possible for them to engage in conversation with each other is understood here as a curator of conversations. While the museum privileged the scopic regime of looking as it connects to showing, the salon privileged the auditory regime of listening as it connects to speaking and voicing. Gathering together diverse subjects in conversation, the salon exercised voicing and listening rather than putting on view and viewing. The conversational culture of the salon was not tied to celebrating the androcentric notion of citizenship, but much rather to aesthetic, cultural, and political processes of emancipation that challenged culture or politics as a given. Conversations are processual and constitute their objects of knowledge through negotiation and dialogue, while exhibitions are fixed and constitute their objects of knowledge through inspection and information.

Of course, salon culture was a class phenomenon connected to the educated elites and the ideas of bourgeois culture. Broadly speaking, within salon culture there have been salons that gathered together feminist resisters who resisted established notions of normative gender roles, religion, sexuality, or race. Modern salon culture was, of course, not a unified phenomenon. Salons differed widely in the ideological, aesthetic, cultural, and political belief systems they celebrated and practiced. There have been Jewish salons in Vienna or Berlin from the 1800s onwards, feminist salons, lesbian salons, or black diasporic salons in Paris during the 1920s. Starting in 1909, Natalie Clifford Barney's hosted a salon at 20 rue Jacob in Paris every Friday. Her salon was

important to the formation of lesbian subjectivities, sexualities and aesthetic expressions in literature, performance, and painting. The sisters Jeanne and Paulette Nardal were Afro-Martiniquais intellectuals who in 1929 began to host their salon at 7 rue Hebert in Paris Clamart. This salon became known as the Negritude Salon, a “multicultural, multinational literary salon, pioneering in its inclusiveness and inspirational to a generation of black leaders and the important journal that grew out of it, *La Revue du Monde Noir*.”<sup>15</sup> Their salon was dedicated to creating an intellectual space for the Afro Martiniquais Diaspora, for Black Internationalism, for Pan Africanism, cultural liberation, emancipation, and women’s rights. Enabling the emergence of new subjectivities, bringing together intellectuals, thinkers, writers, and artists in conversation giving rise to resistance to dominant ideas of culture, in particular sexualized and racialized norms, is understood as curatorial labor.

#### A Contemporary Salon Talk

In 2018, the exhibition *The Place to Be. Salons – Spaces of Emancipation* was shown at the Jewish Museum Vienna.<sup>16</sup> On the occasion of this exhibition, artist Anna Mendelssohn was invited to conceive of a new work dedicated to exploring salon culture from a contemporary perspective. Her video *Salon Talk* seeks to understand what the function of a contemporary salon might be today. Making use of the domestic interior of the Wertheimstein Salon, one of the few original interiors of Jewish salon culture of the turn of the century that has become a local museum and therefore has survived until today in contemporary Vienna, Mendelssohn gathered four guests around the table for a salon talk.<sup>17</sup>

#### IMAGE 1

This talk was filmed and then included in the exhibition. Her invited guests were Dudu Kücükgöl, a Vienna-based muslima, feminist and activist, Elisabeth Bakambamba Tambwe, a Kinshasa-born performance artist who combines dance, visual art and sound, Jens Kastner, a sociologist writing on art and activism, and theatre scholar Gin Müller, who focuses on feminist and queer politics and transgender activism. Their conversation focused on issues, potentials, and controversies of contemporary

feminism in an immigrant, multiethnic, diasporic, post-colonial city such as Vienna. They speak from their different positionalities as a muslim feminist, as a black art maker counteracting institutionalized racism, as a white cis-man, as a white trans-man, and they address issues of power, hegemony, patriarchy, sexual orientation, justice, anti-capitalism, and emancipation. During their conversation, of which a transcript was produced, Dudu Kücükgöl states the following: “For me, feminism is a tool when trying to understand how our society works, how to analyze where some of the problems come from. Not only, but especially for women. It means being critical and showing where we still have weaknesses. By finding where our weaknesses are, we open possibilities to work on solutions. So it’s a tool and a way to reach emancipation as well.”<sup>18</sup> In Kücükgöl’s view feminism can be understood as a tool toward emancipation. This clearly links back to earlier salon conversations and subjects struggling for emancipation which could mean both, the struggle to become part of rights formerly denied and the struggle to define society, rights, subjectivities and sexualities differently. Sociologist Jens Kastner emphasized that in his view “Feminism doesn’t belong to women. I think feminism, as I understand it, deals with a change of society in general.”<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth Bakambamba Tambwe voiced her critique of white feminism as follows: “I have come to realize that there really is a “white feminism.” For example, sometimes I don’t feel included in the conversation. You know, people talk with big words, and everything seems so theoretical – but then in practice, in life, we see how exclusive it actually is.” And Gin Müller expressed the idea that today it is “not so much about smashing patriarchy, but more about developing other social relations, giving visions of what feminism, also intersectional feminism, could be, and also becoming hegemonic with this.”<sup>20</sup> Annas Mendelssohn’s approach allows to speculatively imagine what earlier conversations in female-led, feminist, lesbian, or diasporic salons might have been like. The object of knowledge, in this case feminism, is not fixed, but much rather negotiated by all the subjects gathered together in conversation.

## Feminist Dinner Parties

While salon culture is connected to first wave feminism and emerged in parallel to the making of the modern art museum, the next section focuses on feminist resisters gathered together in conversation during second wave feminism. On March 14, 1979 a simultaneous dinner party event took place that involved more than 2000 feminists round the globe. Artist Suzanne Lacy acted as organizer, convener, and curator of conversations for this large-scale feminist event in which she gathered together contributors round the globe. Lacy's *The International Dinner Party* was occasioned by the opening of Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on March 14, 1979.

Grassroots activism and community organizing strategies were used by Lacy to reach out to feminists in different parts of the world. *The International Dinner Party* was organized in celebration of Lacy's mentor and teacher Judy Chicago acknowledging her monumental sculpture that honors 1038 women from Western culture. Yet, as the invitational letter shows, this celebration was meant to be a corrective to the Western-centric focus adopted by Chicago. "Dear Sisters: We would like to ask you to participate with us in a worldwide celebration of ourselves! We are asking women in many countries to host dinner parties honoring women important to their own culture. These dinner parties, held simultaneously in March 1979, will create a network of women-acknowledging-women which will extend around the world."<sup>21</sup> Then the letter goes on to briefly introduce Judy Chicago's work. "The Dinner Party is a large triangular table with 39 place settings resting on a porcelain floor, which symbolically tells the story of women throughout Western history."<sup>22</sup> *The International Dinner Party* set out to act as a corrective to focusing solely on women in Western history in two ways: on one hand the intent was to honor "living women", on the other hand the idea was to include and celebrate "all cultures".<sup>23</sup> The letter encouraged women to spread the information and to reach out to other women to also host their own dinner parties. This differs both from the representative character of the public art museum and the intimate, and exclusionary character of the salon. Here, all women were invited to acknowledge each other, to recognize each other's female subjectivity and to celebrate women's culture in the broadest sense possible. The conversations round the dinner table were assigned a task by artist Suzanne Lacy. They were to speak about women to



be remembered and honored in their local communities and they were asked to compose a short telegram message giving evidence to the women honored at each dinner. These telegrams were sent to artist Suzanne Lacy who waited for their arrival at the San Francisco Museum of Art on March 14 1979, the date of the opening of *The Dinner Party*. These telegram messages were instantly collected in binders and displayed upon arrival, and their arrival was marked in an hours-long performance by Lacy on a map of the world. A red triangle was put on the place of origin for each arriving telegram. Including all the incoming telegram messages in the art work and the display presents a radical break with the notion of the museum based both on forced colonial extraction and on rigorous selection defining what is and what is not part of culture. Feminist activism resisted these ideas and gathered together all the messages written during *The International Dinner Party* event.

## IMAGE 2

Today, as I suggest, all the messages taken together constitute an ad-hoc and grassroots archive of a feminist moment in March 1979. And, these messages that resulted from the conversations 2000 women had around 200 different dinner tables round the globe provide evidence how different and how similar feminism was in different parts of the world and how connected feminists were at that time. Western-centric and white bias in feminism have remained at the center of discussions within feminism. Even though Lacy sought to counteract the Western and historic bias of Chicago's *The Dinner Party* with her living feminist art work of *The International Dinner Party*, the map on which she marked the places where dinner parties were held shows that most of the telegram messages came from the Western part of the world.

In 2017, artist Patricia Kaersenhout developed a strategy of decolonial appropriation to engage from a contemporary black feminist perspective with Judy Chicago's monumental and iconic work *The Dinner Party*. Kaersenhout's community art project *Guess, Who's Coming To Dinner, Too* was realized at WOW Amsterdam. Kaersenhout adopted the aesthetic components and the formal language as developed by Chicago.

A large triangular dinner table complete with place mats honors 39 Black women as “heroines of resistance’.”<sup>24</sup>

### IMAGE 3

#### Gathered in Activism: Producing Testimony

In an interview conducted with Suzanne Lacy in Bologna in 2015, the artist explained to me that she had modelled *The International Diner Party* after the *International Tribunal on Crimes against Women*. Held in Brussels from March 4 through March 8<sup>th</sup> 1976, this tribunal gathered together 2000 women from 40 different countries, to give testimony of the violent crimes committed against women because of their gender. Organizer Diane H. Russell had lobbied feminists and feminist organizations for two years in order to bring women together to share with each other their personal experiences of sexual crimes committed against them and to give public testimony. Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote a preface for the book that resulted from the International Tribunal on Crimes against Women: “In effect, under whatever regime, law, moral code, social environment in which they find themselves, all women suffer from a specific form of oppression: they will be meeting in Brussels to denounce it. ... In spite of the inferior role which men assign to them, women are the privileged objects of their aggression. ... It is this destiny which will be forcibly rejected by the women gathering in Brussels. When I consider the impetus given to the process of decolonization of women by this Tribunal, I think that it must be regarded as a great historic event.”<sup>25</sup> Such large scale feminist activism based on the idea of testimony and creating evidence was behind Lacy’s idea of “women-acknowledging-women” through *The International Dinner Party*. Lacy’s model of curating transnational conversations remains exemplary to date. This leads me to the question what curating conversations might mean today and what the lessons are that feminist curating can learn from contemporary feminist activism.

#### Learning from Activism

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the emergence of a new feminist movement that seeks to connect anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist, decolonial, and ecological agendas. Today, feminist activism takes on many different modes of expression ranging from large scale assemblies in public space to social media and digital networking. As feminist activism changes global conversations today, new forms of curating conversations both at museums and beyond the museum will have to be envisioned. Learning from contemporary activism, my hope is that such curatorial labor invested in conversations will gather together feminist resisters to work on issues such as feminist and queer feminist epistemology, labor, ecology, class, race, and new forms of denationalized citizenship.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives', *History and Theory* 24, No. 3 (October 1985): 251.

<sup>2</sup> See: Elke Krasny, 'The Salon Model: The Conversational Complex', in Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (eds.), *Feminism and Art History Now. Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 147-163.

<sup>3</sup> See: documenta X: Press Information »100 Days - 100 Guests«, [http://universes-in-universe.de/doc/e\\_press2.htm](http://universes-in-universe.de/doc/e_press2.htm). Accessed at 1 May, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), in particular the chapter "The Exhibitionary Complex", p. 59-88.

<sup>8</sup> Elke Krasny, 'The Salon Model: The Conversational Complex', in Victoria Horne and Lara Perry (eds.), *Feminism and Art History Now. Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), p. 147-148

<sup>9</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalisms and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 98.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 98-99.

<sup>12</sup> See: Carol Duncan, 'Art Museums and the Ritual of Citizenship', in Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (eds.), *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (pp. 88-103). Washington and London: The Smithsonian Institution in association with the American Association of Museums 1991.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre. Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p. 94.

<sup>14</sup> Elke Krasny, 'Citizenship and the Museum: On Feminist Acts,' in Jenna C Ashton (ed.), *Feminism and Museums. Intervention, Disruption and Change*. Volume I, Edinburgh and Boston: Museums Etc, 2017, p. 80.

---

<sup>15</sup> Emily Musil Church, 'In Search of Seven Sisters: a biography of the Nardal sisters of Martinique', <https://dspace.lafayette.edu/handle/10385/1280>. Accessed 8 May, 2019. See also: Robert P. Smith, 'Black Like That: Paulette Nardal and the Negritude Salon', *CLA Journal* XLV (2001): 53–68.

<sup>16</sup> See: <http://www.jmw.at/en/exhibitions/place-be-salons-spaces-emancipation>

<sup>17</sup> See: Der Salon der Villa Wertheimstein (The Salon of the Wertheimstein Villa), [http://www.bezirkmuseum.at/de/bezirkmuseum\\_19/bezirkmuseum/salon\\_und\\_gedenkraeum\\_e/](http://www.bezirkmuseum.at/de/bezirkmuseum_19/bezirkmuseum/salon_und_gedenkraeum_e/). Accessed 8 May, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Mendelssohn: Salon Talk, Video 2018. Unpublished Transcript

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Suzanne Lacy, 'An International Dinner Party to Celebrate Women's Culture', Letter of invitation, Suzanne Lacy Archive.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Kaersenhout, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner, Too?*. <https://www.wow-amsterdam.nl/event/guess-whos-coming-to-dinner-too/>. Accessed 8 May, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, 'Remarks', in Diana E.H. Russell and Nicole Van de Ven (eds.) *Crimes Against Women: Proceedings of the International Tribunal*, published by Les Femmes 1976, distributed by Russell Publications