Oxford

I’m going to focus upon the centering of the USA in feminist curating, which I read as a colonialist default position, no matter the racial, national, or faith-based diversity that the curators attempt to include.

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My comments come from work on an anthology, co-edited with Lara Perry, of the curator’s essays for exhibitions that are a) informed by feminism; b) in major national/regional (canon-forming) museums; c) survey exhibitions; d) focused on contemporary art.

And were in part rehearsed in this essay.

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In the literature, the default reference points for such exhibitions are *WACK!* and *Global Feminisms*. However, Lara and I have found 53 such exhibitions, from Indonesia to Iceland, Kazakhstan to Gran Canaria, Australia to South Africa. For all but three of them the curator’s essays are provided in English as well as any other language.

So there is clearly a problem for art history, for curating, and for feminist thinking if the default reference is not only to the USA-presented exhibitions, but within those exhibitions, to the USA as the centre and the arbiter of what constitutes feminism and the art it informs.

I am going to focus on these two exhibitions and the ways in which they re-centre the USA, re-enacting a colonialist and assimilationist model of cultural politics. I’d like to stress that I saw both exhibitions, saw some great work in them, and appreciated what they achieved. However, , they have some issues that I think we can learn from.

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The title of *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* indicated that the art exhibited would not necessarily be ‘feminist art’; rather, it would explore the relationships between art and what is termed the “social movement” of feminism.

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It was a big sprawling exhibition, in 18 sections, that flowed rather than being labelled in the museum. It is worth checking the names of the sections: These are primarily categories of style, media, imagery, content, and intent. As a group they are surprisingly apolitical for a field that included so many activist individuals, groups, interventions, and artworks.

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In the first paragraph of her catalogue essay, curator Cornelia Butler states her definition of feminism, quoting Peggy Phelan: ‘the conviction that gender has been, and continues to be, a fundamental category for the organization of culture. Moreover, the pattern of that organization usually favours men over women’. Stated like this, the definition emphasises the apolitical, non-activist curatorial categories used in organising the works. Butler then contextualises the title, WACK, with activist feminist groups of the 1970s like WAR, WAC, WITCH, and WSABAL – all of which were American.

Butler situates her own first “interest in 1970s feminist art” with two catalysts. First was how which attention to Matthew Barney’s breakthrough exhibition “virtually eclipsed other simultaneous exhibitions of women artists” and dominated the discussion in a panel titled “What Role Will the Language of Feminism Play in the Art World of the ‘90s?” Second was the intention of the Guggenheim Museum to open its new branch in New York’s Soho with an exhibition of only white men.

So here Butler is indicating her coming to feminism as the product of internal New York art world events, rather than as a commitment to feminist thought and action as a broader political position that is then brought to bear upon the art world amongst other things. She conceptualises a feminism that is interior to the frame of New York Art History; and, implicitly describes an exhibition that embodies the struggle to move beyond that frame. It is fundamentally an incorporative approach – one that attempts to assimilate feminism as a practice of art into the particularity of that art history.

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Butler also tells us why she excluded one artist:

Emily Kame Kngwarreye, for example, was an Australian aboriginal artist who, during the 1970s, made textiles as part of the Utopia Women’s Batik Group […], […] she is not represented in *WACK!* because the economy in which the Utopia Group’s early production circulated did not favor institutional collections and archives. (Butler 17)

From a feminist perspective, this is a surprising statement.

The position of Kngwarreye’s work would be one that was compromised on numerous fronts, and western feminists then and since were struggling over the re-contextualisation of such works. This included direct challenges to, and circumvention of, the curatorial categories that produced such exclusions.

One strategy was to set up alternative structures, reconfiguring the relationship between artists and curators. The realities with which Kngwarreye was dealing as an Indigenous woman in Australia were very different from those of the vast majority of women living in the USA or Europe. but the fact remains that **many** of the works in *WACK!* were made deliberately for circulation in environments that by-passed the mainstream of the art world. So we can see through Butler’s positioning of Kngwareye that *WACK!* is a fundamentally revisionist version of the history that is less impelled by feminist thinking than it is by contemporary curatorial and art historical practices, realised on an archival scale.

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*Global Feminisms*

Global *Feminisms* was the opening exhibition for the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, alongside the long-term installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. In their catalogue essay, Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly indicate their generational focus upon artists born since 1960, and work made since 1990 (this contrasts with *WACK!*, which focused on art of the 1970s). The focus of their essay is on the thinking informing their choice to mark the opening of the Center with an exhibition of international, rather than only American, art, and how they went about achieving that.

They discuss recognising their limited global knowledge; and their research with a network of ‘local-global advisors’, although these remain un-named. They discuss their aim for ‘openness, multiculturalism, and variety’; and reflecting this internationalism in commissioning the catalogue’s seven essays, five of which are by writers outside the USA. Nochlin and Reilly name ‘the art world capitals’ as Paris, New York, Berlin and London – firmly situated in the West.

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The significance of this is that they go on to say that many of the exhibition’s artists, were born beyond Europe or North America, but have moved into those regions:

a process they say is not ‘selling out’ but is named as “moving in, changing the standards and values of the art world itself by bringing new visions and languages to bear upon the problems of today”.

The essay ends end by placing *Global Feminisms* in “a trajectory of recent feminist exhibitions which began with *Gloria: Another Look at Feminist Art in the 1970s* and *Personal and Political: The Women’s Art Movement 1969-1975*” – both of which were American exhibitions.

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So what I am suggesting is that these two exhibitions, amazing as they were in some respects, in others offer a deeply assimilationist model: one where diversity and inclusion is enacted by holding a door open, but not fundamentally changing the structure of the house.