

DIRT IS CLEAN WHEN THERE IS A VOLUME

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In the spring of 2015, as an editor at *Artforum*, I commissioned a short text from Jo Baer on the occasion of Agnes Martin's traveling retrospective. Because the women's names are often said in the same breath in the context of Minimalism—they were the only two women, out of twenty-eight artists, in Lawrence Alloway's landmark 1966 *Systemic Painting* exhibition at the Guggenheim—I proposed that Baer share a personal anecdote, or write about a work that interested her, or discuss the ways in which her work was in dialogue with Martin's. Baer sent the following response:

I'M AFRAID I have nothing to contribute vis-à-vis Agnes Martin and her work. I met her only once, in the early 1960s (at an opening at the Robert Elkon Gallery in New York for the first show by my then husband, John Wesley), and she was pretty strange, bitching to him about her lack of prestige compared with Robert Rauschenberg et al. Her work (like Robert Ryman's) has never interested me: The lyrical is not my meat. Sorry, I know our "well-known" women's voices should show solidarity, but even in death?

We decided to run her reply—a sharp barb in the midst of near-hagiography. The sentiment offered a critical corrective to the essentializing narrative that aligns these artists because of two factors: their gender and their engagement with geometric abstraction. Baer's note has returned to me time and again, for the words *should* and *solidarity*, for the idea that the conditions of these terms might change posthumously, and for the attendant apology.

We can only speculate whether Baer might have responded more generously, or not at all, should Martin still be living. Yet the fact that she found the distinction worthy of remark and that she emphasized her sense of obligation suggests she might have been more circumspect in her reply. There is, of course, a difference between not responding and stating a refusal to respond. And this refusal wasn't simply that; it includes a stinging anecdote laced between statements of disinterest. But what irks me about Baer's response isn't its bristle; it is its underlying conflation of notions of solidarity and celebration. Though the latter may well be part of the former, solidarity is only handicapped by the idea that it must be celebratory.

What constitutes a gesture of solidarity in the context of critical production is a complicated equation, not least because the conditions that shape agency, representation, and lack are always shifting. For women artists who worked in the post-war period—with marginal representation in institutions and the market, and with support networks that were not as robust as those shared by women today—solidarity might have meant championing work based on a confluence of gender and merit. It might have meant sharing the spotlight. But if we take solidarity at its definition, as unity among people who have the same interests and standards, we must retool the term. To uphold those shared interests and standards, we must consider solidarity beyond inclusion to embrace rigorous critique and the formation of communities dedicated to both mentorship and productive antagonism—perhaps, mentorship by way of productive antagonism.

In the dealings of women, is it not greater to leverage the stirrings of contradiction, rift, and dissensus, and to come together in discourse *because* of these stirrings, than to quiet them in the service of “solidarity”? Baer’s statement—in contradistinction to its cattiness, but because of its dissent—is a feminist gesture. Though its assumptions about solidarity may be outmoded, the sentiment’s actual, functional expression, insofar as it complicates such categorical approaches to history, is indeed one of solidarity, more rigorously conceived.

To set the stage for a discussion of criticism and mentorship among women in the contemporary art world, it seems important to acknowledge a weirdness or discomfort—corroborated only empirically and anecdotally—that attends blunt address of the practical and identifiable ways in which women participate and are compensated differently. My proximity to these topics blurs their edges, but I can only attest to the complicated feelings they summon, to the almost prickly response such topics trigger in my colleagues and friends who identify as women. I speak of feelings because feelings, too often considered gendered, are similarly dismissed in such discussions, as vital as they may be to the way power is manifested. Indeed, although art is a place where, as artist Hannah Black recently described, “we can treat the self as historical and social material,”¹ there remains a shared unease with the category of woman writer, woman artist, woman curator or art historian. This is not only because both the criteria and relevance of the category are unclear, but because to identify with the category—as is the case with any such identification—is inherently to exclude oneself from others. This kind of identification brings with it the risk of accepting that women are the bearer of gender, a construction from which male-identified subjects might be exempt.

But moreover, why do female categories seem always already diminutive, even embarrassing, especially for those who ostensibly belong to them? Can it be chalked up to internalized misogyny? Or does it have more to do with a hesitation surrounding the blunt political sociology of gender in the art world, or the regressive formations of gender and representation that risk generalization and stereotyping? Perhaps it is an allergy to the ways in which categories of identity are easily packaged and exploited by the market. Or it could come from the shade of defeat these categories stir up—by rejecting such categories, one distances oneself from the marginalization they suggest.

It may also be a byproduct of the sense that cultural discourse already dealt with these problems in the ’80s and ’90s and we should be on to less obvious and more nuanced questions of identity. The embrace of intersectional theory—an identity politics in which one’s sense of self is informed by experiences based on encounters of class, gender, race, and sexuality—makes it difficult to return to such reductive terms. We may write from an intersectional perspective about intersectional work, but this doesn’t diminish the necessity to point to the very material discrepancies between the problematic but deeply lived categorical positions of, specifically, men and women.

¹ Hannah Black, “The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic,” *Artforum*, June 2016

This is to say that there is a disparity between theory and practice. Though we long ago metabolized the concept that there were and are many feminisms, that various discriminations are always imbricated in our experiences of sexism and racism, and that identity is reified by institutional power, there remains an enormous economic and professional inequity between genders. This is well trodden but perennially important ground. In 2014, the *New York Times* ran an article that revealed women “run just a quarter of the biggest art museums in the United States and Canada, and they earn about a third less than their male counterparts.” And in 2015, Amelia Jones reminded us in her essay “On Sexism in the Art World” that “works by women artists are still worth far less than similar works by men from the same generation and locale.” Last year, the *Times* published “Female Artists are (Finally) Getting their Turn,” a piece about the spate of exhibitions that opened this past spring featuring women-themed surveys, which Barbara Kruger describes as “playing catch-up after centuries of women’s marginality and invisibility.” (This outward institutional acknowledgement of discrimination is a start, but one that seems exceedingly belated.) This is all further complicated by the fact that in the system’s pipeline, over 60% of students in MFA programs are women.²

It’s an exhausting topic to rehash. This unease might be located in a contradiction fundamental to the problem: the contemporary art world is a cultural field that not only prides itself, but also generates content and capital based on inclusion, difference, and pluralism. But this is only flimsily manifested in both institutions and social networks. As Suhail Malik has written, “It may be that despite their sincerely wrought advances, the theoretical-political demands of contemporary art’s critical understanding serve to offset and exculpate the generally abysmal gender inequality in position, wealth, and what might be called exhibition-power in contemporary art.”³ It’s hard to imagine this contradiction—the sense that we have culturally and theoretically transcended misogyny in the face of material evidence otherwise—wouldn’t incur some form of psychological disenfranchisement.

In spite, or perhaps *because*, of women’s convoluted relationship to power and the shifting contours of solidarity, there remains a sense that there is a gulf separating rivalry and partiality between women. This binary may well simplify relationships so as to make them more exploitable. Here, I’ll parse some of the ways in which this distance, as it manifests in the contemporary art world, is reified or dissolved by networks and modes of criticality. It seems to me that in both arenas it is imperative to constantly reassess the ways in which solidarity might be put to use.

If we take solidarity as an expression of morality, it is located not simply in the promotion of the idea of justice, but in acts. Avery Kolers has recently written of solidarity outside the terms of alliance, as deference to the judgment of those who suffer inequity. But it is important to properly account for the diverse and often-conflicting forms of inequity that complicate what that deference might look like. In the current climate, we might return to Durkheim’s theory of organic solidarity, which—in contrast

² Maura Reilly, “Taking the Measure of Sexism: Facts, Figures, and Fixes,” *Artnews*, May 2015

³ Suhail Malik, “Survey on Gender Ratios in Curating Programs,” *Red Hook Journal*, October 23, 2012

to forms of cohesion based on labor, education, or kinship—refers to an interdependence based on specialization, or difference. It's a helpful model: Solidarity as shared agency found not necessarily in shared intention, but in the production of a condition that assumes the necessity to constantly negotiate many different intentions. Chantal Mouffe's writing on agonism also comes to mind. She writes that true political thought is only made possible by accepting that complete inclusion and consensus are impossible. In an effort to establish modes of identification and representation that are in keeping with pluralism—the conditions in which we ostensibly want to find solidarity—we “must enable the expression of conflict.”⁴

In a recent interview, Linda Nochlin admitted, “One of the things I did in the '70s was to study men... they can take criticism. They do not burst into tears; they do not get all upset. Men say some really cutting, critical things about one another and that is acceptable. A level of confidence and an ability to take criticism is essential to success. Women all too often are not brought up to take intellectual and professional criticism, harsh criticism.”⁵ Here, we have a confounding object: A feminist art historian playing into a specious cliché about women's fragility—one that seems blithely impervious to the extremes of criticism constantly leveled at women, if only for their failures to meet impossible standards of femininity.

But nonetheless, I find myself wrestling with my own internalization of her remark. As a critic, I often try to check any impulse to be more generous, gentle, supportive, unsentimental, or unsparing when writing about the work of other women—specifically living women, and often emerging artists, who are the subject of 70% of my criticism over the past two years. And while I don't typically find that my writing veers in any of these directions to any unwarranted degree, the fact that I find myself looking for discrepancies gives those discrepancies some kind of shape, makes them real.

I suspect the problem isn't with women not being receptive to criticism; it's that critics may be hesitant to dole it out. The dominant approach to the practice of art criticism today, regardless of the gender of the artist—perhaps in response to the various encroachments on its charge by the curatorial text, the artist statement, the Facebook review, and Contemporary Art Daily—is to eschew the binaries of good and bad, or successful and unsuccessful. Instead, critics seek to offer something that augments the work being discussed, fleshing out a context that will position the work for a potential viewer and for posterity.

The idea is that the work has already been deemed worthy of attention by dint of it appearing in the limited real estate of a publication. In keeping with this ethos, a prevalent feminist methodology among women critics is quantitative, rather than qualitative. That is, the tactic plays out in terms of a percentage of coverage—or the number of women covered in relation to men—rather than on the level of language.

⁴ Chantal Mouffe, “Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics,” Pavilion, pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/

⁵ Linda Nochlin, “Linda Nochlin on Feminism Then and Now,” *Artnews*, June 2015

Johanna Fateman told me her fundamental critical strategy regarding women is to try to review perhaps more than 80%, and then in the writing to reflect her own intersectional feminist viewpoint and ideals. Prudence Peiffer echoed the sentiment. By covering many more female than male artists, she feels as though she is “working against certain blanket assumptions about art coverage.” Kaelen Wilson-Goldie’s approach shifts the focus from women to feminist artists: “I would like to think that I don’t use different language or gender-specific language; I’m definitely not easier on women because they are women. As a critic I’m looking at what a feminist practice looks like and it’s important to look for it in women and men’s practices... artists who deal with gender and power.”

To prioritize feminist work without privileging the work of women productively nuances the quantitative method. To do so takes the concept of organic solidarity at face value, leveraging collective agency through difference. But this is nonetheless tricky territory that recalls the problems inherent to any such affirmative action: To focus squarely on the work of women is, in some ways, to replicate the patriarchal gender binary that contributes to inequity. To even-handedly treat feminist work made by men and women before material conditions reflect equality is to risk, mildly, perpetuating the sense of exhaustion that surrounds this very conversation and may enfeeble change. More perniciously, this treatment risks the appropriation and aestheticization of feminist discourse without recourse to the systems that produce inequity and make feminist work urgent in the first place.

Criticism, at its root, is an art of wielding power. We might look to Baudelaire, who claimed the practice “must be partial, passionate, and political, that is to say, written from an exclusive point of view but from the point of view which opens the widest horizons.” To open the widest horizons to a work, of course, is also to define the reach, the limit, of those horizons. Wilson-Goldie, discussing criticism in the context of both gender and region, said it directly: “It’s not worth going off on something hard unless there is the power to sustain it.” And therein lies the catch: If something can withstand the exertion of rigorous criticism that in many ways bestows power, it is often because the power was already there. A rigorous critique signals that the subject—the work, but ultimately the artist—is not only worthy enough of the attention to deserve a negative review, but powerful enough to survive it.

Take an obvious example regarding the apex of cynical extravagance—the recent *Artnews* headline “A Disastrous Damien Hirst Show in Venice.” The first lines of the article deem the show of 189 works, which cost upwards of 65 million dollars, at the Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana “one of the worst exhibitions of contemporary art staged in the past decade... devoid of ideas, aesthetically bland, and ultimately snooze-inducing.”⁶ But this pan (and the myriad others like it) didn’t halt sales or the spate of articles published on the work; articles which not only contributed to Hirst’s already inflated cultural capital but also robbed artists with less exposure of the space on the page.

I don’t mean to suggest that women critics have a responsibility to write unnecessarily harshly about the work of women artists. What I hope to convey is that the current trends

⁶ Andrew Russeth, “A Disastrous Damien Hirst Show in Venice,” *Artnews*, May 8, 2017

in criticism, while evenhanded and generative, might unwittingly handicap artists who are already marginalized. Critique should, in the interest of promoting pluralism, be considered an act of solidarity. Too often in the context of women's efforts it is equated with bitchiness, cattiness, hostility. I think of Renata Adler, whose career became defined to some degree by her 8,000-word takedown, in 1980, of her *New Yorker* colleague Pauline Kael's collected writings, which she deemed to be "worthless" demagoguery. Rachel Cooke, writing in the *Guardian* in 2013, described the review as "journalistic sororicide." The issue isn't that there is a more entrenched divide between partiality and rivalry among women cultural producers. The issue is the *perception* that there is.

There are, of course, many formal and informal women-only art world events, groups, and organizations. In New York alone, we have ArtTable, the Professional Organization for Women in the Arts, the Women in the Arts & Media Coalition, among many others, along with more discreetly organized dinner events, including those coordinated by the SculptureCenter, or alums from the Center for Curatorial Studies, or women editors at New York publications. But these types of efforts may be insufficient—whether due to their rarity or exclusivity, or perhaps because of a tendency to be polite about the basis for gathering, as evinced by two projects from the summer of 2014. Both were centered on a conversation geared toward frank and unyielding reckoning with the topic of networks and mentorships between women in the art world—those that are formalized, and those that could be perceived as cronyistic. And both accounted formally for the concept of exclusion discussed, albeit in contrasting manners: Anicka Yi produced a podcast that was aired, for free, online, and Carol Bove and Stephanie Harris hosted a private picnic discussion whose content would forever be inaccessible—documented only in photographs.

On May 31, 2014, Yi's *Lonely Samurai* podcast episode "What Was Collaboration" was recorded at Chapter Gallery in New York. The artist moderated a discussion about the "viability of female networks and bottom-line economics for women in the contemporary art world," with gallerist Stefania Bortolami, advisor Cristina Delgado, curator Ruba Katrib, artist Amy Sillman, and critic Andrew Russeth. The conversation is generous and trenchant, bouncing from frustration to jokey rib-jabbing. It tackles the ways in which women might support or handicap each other as they wrestle with their own privileges, entitlements, and allowances in a male-dominated ecosystem, and how these dynamics play out in terms of social, cultural, and economic capital.

Some important work is done: The group defines their metrics of success as having opportunities, having the freedom to pick and choose what opportunities to accept, and having a voice for which there is a market. They question the celebration of "bro" communities, typically organized around a gallery, including Know More Games, 247365, and the Stillhouse Group, noting that this kind of group exists in lesbian communities, but not straight ones. Yi suggests this might have to do with the perception that women are more competitive than men, or with the fact that it isn't as easy for a woman to command a room the way a man might—grabbing a curator or wooing a dealer. It's true that this form of generating "community" via persuasion might be misread when coming from a woman. Bortolomi points to the triumvirate of New York

blue chip galleries run by women—Barbara Gladstone, Paula Cooper, and Marian Goodman—and the lack of mentorship their namesakes have demonstrated. Where Larry Gagosian got his break from Leo Castelli, the group couldn't think of a gallerist's career similarly facilitated by a woman. "To be successful as a woman is exponentially more difficult," Bortolami admits, "so once you have a degree of success, you don't really want to drag someone with you. It might slow you down."

At the root of much of the conversation is the concession that individualism and empowerment are wrapped up in neoliberal capitalism at the expense of feminist pluralism. That because of a cultural emphasis on individual comfort and success, women in positions in power are not likely to try and dismantle the system that has benefitted them, even as they acknowledge their position as an exception to the rule and their complicity in the patriarchy. "Individuals want the freedom to be a singularity and not have to represent an entire group or organization," Yi explains, "we want the freedom to fail, or be ourselves, to be post-identity politics... A lot of females who are ambitious and intelligent have to be light on their feet and to cut themselves off from other people like them in order to succeed." Whereas Yi reckons with the complicated marriage of freedom and compromise that seems to attend this neoliberal success, in a separate conversation, Johanna Fateman articulated a similar discord in the ways in which successful women organize—it is often done with an aim to mobilize an image of exceptionalism: "When you're dealing with people who do have a foothold in the art world, women organizing on the basis of being women is often kept secret—it's in a way uncool, an admission of a professional vulnerability. There is a reason that these things are separate and exclusive.... Obviously there's cache to being the anomaly." It's a difficult charge, to be self-reflective about being the rewarded object of moral licensing, a function that doesn't alleviate discrimination, but justifies the perpetuation of a discriminatory system. It's difficult to risk hard-won privileges.

Whereas Yi's podcastone of three that ran, somewhat under the radar, on her own blog and later in *DIS*—aired squeamish details, investing in transparency as a mobilizing tactic, Bove and Harris chose to mimic the exclusivity that structures so much power in the art world. Their project was done in response to an invitation by Cecilia Alemani to contribute to her Pier 54 exhibition in Chelsea, for which she invited twenty-seven women artists to update Willoughby Sharp's 1971 Pier 18 exhibition of the work of twenty-seven artists who were all, incidentally, male. Sharp invited the artists—among them Vito Acconci, John Baldessari, Gordon Matta-Clark, Dan Graham, Allen Ruppersberg, Richard Serra, and William Wegman—to conceive an event or action that would take place on the abandoned pier. The projects would be accessible to the public only via photographic documentation by the artist duo Shunk-Kender. For Alemani's updated iteration, photographed by Liz Ligon, Bove and Harris invited all participants—including Margaret Lee, Liz Magic Laser, Virginia Overton, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Sara VanDerBeek, and Anicka Yi—to discuss the ways in which their projects engaged with the original as a tribute, reaction, or re-enactment, as was suggested by Alemani. In their invitation, which was not published and was only provided by the organizers for the purposes of this essay and posterity, Bove and Harris wrote:

...we noticed the mode of disclosing the group's all-female makeup is both parenthetical and elliptical, "27 (all male) artists" and "27 artists (all female)." We wondered, what is

gained from obfuscation here? What does this type of silence mean? We have reasoned that a similar silencing is required to get to the bottom of it and so we would like to ask the participants to keep the conversation (including this message) confidential. We are holding the conversation in private and will not record the comments in any form. As with the rest of the projects, our conversation will be photographed, but from a distance.

A black-and-white photograph shows a notecard tucked into a fence on the pier, reading “Pier 54 artists who are in town on August 7th, 2014, gather at the pier to have a private conversation.” One cannot help but regret that whatever was said is inaccessible—it would be instructive, generous, evidence. But the conditions of the gathering are what accommodated its form, its content. This exclusivity seems antagonistic, and that is exactly the point. In the documentation, we see a group of women sitting in a circle before the Manhattan skyline, on the cracked pavement of piers already saturated with histories of marginalized people—artists, gathering to find community, to produce. In some of the images the women are captured from afar, and they seem to dissemble into the architecture. In others, taken up close, we see that the women are laughing.

Looking in from the outside, I can’t decide whether the project is, in effect, as slim as its documentation or whether this slowness makes it resonantly potent. Until the publication of this essay, the nature of the conversation was nowhere made evident, a gesture that, to my mind, softens the power the performed exclusion might lend to the topic at hand. We are left with the sense that this meeting produced something robust on the relational level, but something still handicapped by uncertainty surrounding its appropriation of the terms of exclusion and the attendant anxiety of protectionism.

It’s hard to say which model best benefits the cause—the podcast’s more generous public ventilation of grit or the huddle’s obfuscatory territorialization. The first approach dispels the narrative that gender inequity in the art world is a moribund topic and the second generates an air of desire or mystery around it. Of course, it’s a *yes, and* situation. That is, both models are critically important, and we must accumulate others, debating their efficacy and unwieldiness along the way.

If identity politics of the ’80s and ’90s was in part about facilitating alliances and communities, identity politics of today have illuminated, as Hannah Black has described, “the problem of establishing meaningful collectivity—without elision, domination, or uninflected hierarchy—against a capitalist class capable of extreme acts of violence and mass control. Collectivity might be the necessary first step toward making life bearable, but the production of that collectivity may be less cozy than strategies of inclusion, diversity, and universality suggest.”⁷ As we reimagine the ways in which forms of criticism and mentorship might better serve pathways to the kinds of success we privilege and collectivities that promote shared interests and standards, we must enable the expression of conflict. We cannot fear that it will result in rivalries or biases that will define us, limit us, make us exploitable. It is one thing to deny the existence of the art world’s inequities, and it is another to write, to gather, and to produce as if they did not exist. There is a difference between not responding and stating a refusal to respond.

⁷ Black, *ibid.*

