

Künstlerinnen International (1877-1977): a ghost exhibition in the German feminist historical memory

FRANCESCA DELLA VENTURA

On 8 March 1977, the exhibition *Künstlerinnen International (1877-1977)* debuted in Charlottenburg, Berlin. It presented a comprehensive survey of international women's art spanning the past century. The inspiration for this show stemmed from the 1976 County Museum exhibition in Los Angeles, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin.

Among the feminist exhibitions in West Germany during the 1970s, *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1997* sparked the most controversy during its run, yet paradoxically left the least traces within German art historiography on feminist exhibitions. While a few scholarly articles have been dedicated to *Künstlerinnen International*, along with articles and reviews in newspapers of the time, there remains a scarcity of testimonies from those who actively participated in the exhibition. Two notable contributions stand out: the exhibition catalogue by Ursula Bierther (Bierther, *et al.*, 1977), featuring significant contributions from figures like Lucy Lippard, VALIE EXPORT, and Marianne Wex; and, thirty years later, the work of Renate Buschmann (Buschmann, 2008, pp. 5-15). In both texts, the authors delve into the genesis and rationale behind the exhibition, placing it within its historical context.

Critical essays in the exhibition catalogue addressed pivotal issues in the development of feminist art in West Germany. Notably, Lucy Lippard focused on feminist art criticism, VALIE EXPORT delved into the much-debated concept of creativity in feminist art, and Marianne Wex's contribution centered on feminist art in general, among other topics.

In addition to these contributions, it's essential to highlight the excellent study by Monika Kaiser (*Neubesetzungen des Kunst-Raumes Feministische Kunstausstellungen und ihre Räume, 1972-1987*, 2013) on the utilization of exhibition spaces for artists across Berlin's three different locations (Kaiser, 2013, pp. 138-160).

Furthermore, articles and reviews in art magazines and newspapers of the time (Bovenschen, 1977, pp. 41-46; Kotschenreuther, 1977; Rhode, 1977; Schwarzkopf, 1977), as well as videos in the archives of the Kunstverein NGbK (Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst) in Berlin and a clip from Helke Sander's 1977 film *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit* serve as additional sources on this exhibition¹.

In a 2012 video interview, the German feminist writer and critic Silvia Bovenschen (1946 Point bei Waarkirchen - 2017 Berlin) reflected on how public opinion in West Germany during the mid-70s considered it outrageous to exhibit women's and feminist art in such a prestigious institutional space as the Orangerie of the Charlottenburg Palace in West Berlin².

However, the harshest criticism of the exhibition *Künstlerinnen International (1877-1977)* came from the feminist group and many of the female artists exhibited. In an interview for *Frieze*, Bovenschen recalled one of the numerous feminist demonstrations: when the rooms of the Orangerie were covered with tampons to demonstrate feminists' disapproval of the selection of exhibiting artists (Kaiser, 2013, p. 150). NGbK (Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst) member Cillie Rentmeister issued an appeal to all women in the *Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst*. This official letter, distributed as a flyer and published in the press and on the radio, invited women to bring their artwork to the exhibition. However, the appeal caused so much indignation that the exhibition was closed to the public on that day. *Künstlerinnen International* was opened on March 20 only to women who performed in the exhibition rooms of the Charlottenburg Schloss on that day. Afterward, the exhibition halls returned to their usual state.

Künstlerinnen International (1877-1977) was as significant for the history of feminism and for German women's art as it was equally debated. In the interview, Silvia Bovenschen said that later feminist exhibitions didn't mention this exhibition, to the extent that it was almost forgotten in col-

¹ Sander shot *Die allseitig reduzierte Persönlichkeit* during the opening of *Künstlerinnen International* in the Orangerie in Charlottenburg.

² Michalea Melián interviewed Silvia Bovenschen and Sarah Schumann a few years before their deaths (in 2016 and 2019 respectively). The two women lived together in Berlin and were bound by a professional as well as a private partnership throughout their lives. The interview has been transcribed by the British contemporary art magazine *Frieze* in 2013. (Melián, 2013).

lective German memory. Nowadays, many of the artists who participated in it don't even list it among the group exhibitions they took part in later. Despite its critical misfortune, *Künstlerinnen International (1877-1977)* can be considered significant for feminist art and Italian women's exhibitions. For example, in 1978, the Italian feminist artist and curator Mirella Bentivoglio, who had already been invited to participate in the Berlin exhibition, curated *Materializzazione del Linguaggio* in Venice³. For this exhibition, she invited some of the German women artists who worked on visual poetry and were also present in the Berlin exhibition in 1977.

A few years later, on the occasion of the exhibition in Milan at the Palazzo Reale, *L'altra metà dell'Avanguardia 1910-1940: Pittrici e scultrici nei movimenti dell'avanguardie storiche*, Lea Vergine claimed on several occasions that her project was also a reaction to two slightly earlier exhibitions: *Women Artists: 1550-1950* at the Brooklyn Museum in Los Angeles and, indeed, *Künstlerinnen International*⁴. Both exhibitions were considered by Vergine to be 'nefarious'. According to the Italian critic, these surveys involved too broad a spectrum of female artists and the approach and criteria for selecting works did not follow any methodology. Vergine argued that these exhibitions often conflated art history discourses with those of sociology, anthropology, and feminist struggles. In her review for the Italian magazine "Data", Lea Vergine emphasised that *Künstlerinnen international* was a disqualifying operation towards the course of the feminist liberation movement, women artists, and women in general. Furthermore, the critic and curator highlighted the gaps in the

³ At the Venice Art Biennial of 1978, the exhibition "*Materializzazione del linguaggio*", curated by the artist Mirella Bentivoglio, opened on 20 September 1978. It took place in the *Spazio Aperto* at the *Magazzini del Sale alle Zattere*. The small exhibition, focusing on visual poetry and with a wide programme of performances and talks, gathered eighty female contemporary artists from eighteen European and non-European countries. The aim of the exhibition was the re-appropriation of the language, a field almost exclusively dominated by men, in order to emphasise the uniqueness of phonetic and visual writing. Language was functional because they allowed women artists to assert themselves against a patriarchy that had always dominated culture, literature, and speech in general. For further study see the exhibition catalogue (Bentivoglio, 1978) and Stefania Portinari's article (Portinari, 2017, pp. 38-69).

⁴ "Women Artists: 1550-1950" at the Brooklyn Museum in Los Angeles was curated by Ann Sutherland and Linda Nochlin and took place between December 1976 and March 1977. It was the first occasion for a major survey of women's artistic work over the centuries. Indeed, it was opposed to the more modest feminist exhibitions that had been held until then. "Women Artists" with around ninety women artists on display wanted to recover an important part of art history, that of women, which had been overshadowed by patriarchal structures and by the genius man artist.

participation of women artists, both historical figures and those active in the last fifteen years. She also criticised the Italian section for the absence of important artists such as Carla Accardi, Dadamaino, Marisa Merz or Giulia Nicolai (Vergine, 1977, p. 38).

Her disappointment was also aimed at showing how heavy prejudices about male-female relations in Italy were emerging in German public opinion (1977, p. 38). Significant names in the history of European feminism, such as Carla Lonzi, Anna Oberto, Agnes Deves, Aline Dallier, Anne Marie Boetti, as well as the more international figure of Susan Sontag, were completely forgotten by the curators of the Berlin exhibition (1977, p. 38). Despite Vergine's harsh criticism, the curator herself would treasure the Berlin exhibition: out of the one hundred and eighty-nine artists from the period 1910-1940 exhibited in Milan, she showcased thirty-one of those who were present in Berlin (Maderna, 2020, p. 32). Lea Vergine also looked forward to this exhibition for another reason. *Künstlerinnen International* was the first European exhibition whose presentation was guaranteed - even financially - by a public museum. At that time, Vergine had already received several rejections for her exhibition on the female avant-garde. In her opinion, this exhibition was certainly a disappointment compared to the expectations she had. However, it represented an encouragement to obtain the much-needed funding from the City of Milan for the exhibition she had been planning since at least 1975⁵.

It is not feasible to provide a comprehensive background of the complex socio-political and economic context of West Germany in the second half of the 1970s within the scope of this article. However, certain facts regarding the feminist struggles of the era may be relevant, particularly in relation to the statements of the exhibition curators: This «exhibition would not have come into being without the feminist struggles» (Biether et al., 1977, p. 1).

In 1971, three years before an initial project proposal by the curatorial collective *Frauen in der Kunst*, the magazine "Stern" published a manifesto-article *Wir haben abgetrieben*⁶, signed by three hundred and seventy-five German women. These women had abortions and demanded the invalidation of Law 218, which regulated (even today) the interruption of

⁵ 1975 is a very significant year for the development of feminist art dynamics. It is, in fact, the Women's International Year, in which various events, including art exhibitions, were realized and financed.

⁶ Translation «We had an abortion!».

pregnancy in Germany and the penalties for those who did not practice it as required by law. In 1974, in West German, an exemption was approved whereby abortion was possible within the first twelve weeks of pregnancy. Unexpectedly, only one year later, this pro-abortion law was declared unconstitutional because it favored protecting the life of the fetus over the pregnant woman's right to self-determination. In 1976, two years after the original revision of 218 was issued, a new draft was prepared, providing for a prison sentence of up to three years if the termination of pregnancy was carried out in non-emergency circumstances or, in any case, without a medical justification.⁷

In addition to the feminist struggles, which then focused mainly on wage issues, family policies, and abortion, there were also political protests in the mid-1970s. These struggles – strongly influenced by the ideas of Herbert Marcuse – accused the West German government of supporting the United States in the Vietnam War and dictatorships in Latin America and Spain in favor of foreign business interests. The *Rote Armee Fraktion*, a terrorist cell that grew out of the German socialist student groups of 1968, used violence, and brought the city of West Berlin to a real state of urban guerrilla warfare. Although the attacks continued well into the mid-1980s, this spiral of violence triggered by armed struggle was strongly criticised by the citizens because it only served to increase the reactionary tendency of the conservative forces.

Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977: the exhibition

In this intricate socio-political climate, where women sought to assert their creativity in the arts alongside the recognition of women's social importance and their right to self-determination, the art exhibition *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* opened on March 8, 1977. The project had been initially proposed at the end of 1973 by artists Sarah Schumann and Evelyn Kuwertz, along with the working group *Frauen in der*

⁷ Indeed, despite the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent German reunification, scant attention has been paid to this law, and the situation in Germany today remains critically unresolved. The 1992 Single Law, passed by the German Bundestag, ostensibly aimed to protect perinatal life by regulating abortion, mandating compulsory medical consultation and approval only under specific circumstances. However, this legislative decision inherently prioritized the sanctity of the fetus's life over a woman's autonomy in decision-making. For a comprehensive exploration of the feminist movement in Germany, refer to Nave-Herz (Nave-Herz, 1997) and Karl (Karl, 2020).

Kunst, which was part of the *Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst* (NGbK)⁸. The NGbK was a democratically based art association in Berlin that emerged in response to the student unrest in 1969. The objective of *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* was to blend the historical presence of women in art – particularly focusing on the last hundred years – with the showcasing of contemporary women artists engaged in the feminist struggle.

Unfortunately, the initial project faced rejection as being too ambitious, encountering resistance from both male and female members of the NGbK. However, undeterred, the curators of *Künstlerinnen* persisted, and in the autumn of 1974, they presented a new, revised draft. This time, the project found acceptance as consensus towards the feminist movement had grown, particularly among female members.

We were an open group from the beginning; [...]. But this conclusion was wrong, because the constant changes proved to be inhibiting, delaying decision-making, always leading to new redistributions of the workload, unnecessary re-examinations of points that were already considered ticked off. And the openness of the group initially gave rise to a non-commitment that always threatened the cohesion of the remaining women, the solidarity that was so necessary. As the pressure of work increased - especially in view of the imminent opening date - the emotional support within the group was no longer sufficient; it came largely from outside; a dichotomy that actually contradicted our idea of cooperation. The group was only closed in the final phase of about half a year, and only two women from the 'early days' of the project are still involved. The time frame until the opening of the exhibition was not planned, and the scope of the exhibition is also the result of a process, not the implementation of an initially fixed concept (Bierther, *et al.*, 1977, p. 4).

The catalogue indicated that, besides Schumann and Kuwertz, who were involved from the inception to the completion of the curatorial evolution of the project, the other female artists who contributed to the selection

⁸ Sarah Schumann and Evelyn Kuwertz first crossed paths within the socialist-feminist group *Brot und Rosen*, which originated in West Berlin in 1971. While the group actively engaged in discussions and advocacy against Article 218, its primary focus lay elsewhere: revealing the societal power structures perpetuated by the availability of the abortion pill. Within *Brot und Rosen*, activists vocally criticized government policies, medical practices, pharmaceutical companies, and religious institutions. Their advocacy extended to promoting education about the pill and other contraceptive methods. One of their seminal publications, the 1972 *Frauenhandbuch*, underscored the potential risks associated with the pill, highlighting its side effects.

and realization of the exhibition experienced frequent changes over time. As Bierther noted, this constant alteration led to numerous difficulties, including the allocation of workload and, most significantly, the process of decision-making, sometimes even calling into question the very essence of the feminist group.

In the final phase, in the last six months before the opening, the group became definitive and consisted of Ursula Bierther, Evelyn Kuwertz, Karin Petersen, Inge Schumacher, Sarah Schumann, Ulrike Stelzl, and Petra Zöfelt; Silvia Bovenschen provided important critical support.

With almost a thousand artworks on display and one hundred and eighty-two women artists involved, the exhibition was too expansive to be contained solely within the spaces of the NGbK. The Orangerie of Charlottenburg Schloss became the main venue due to the size and grandeur of the spaces. The Haus der Kunstbibliothek and the NGbK spaces were also utilized. The curators' intention to showcase and affirm women's creativity and their presence within art history, as well as their absence within public institutions such as museums and galleries, was evident from the title. In addition to the few names that were previously well-known, such as Paula Modersohn-Becker, Käthe Kollwitz, Hanna Höch, Leonora Carrington, Gabriele Münter, and Frida Kahlo, emerging women artists involved in painting, graphics, photography, sculpture, as well as those belonging to the Bauhaus group and the Russian Avant-Garde, including Suzanne Valadon, Jeanne Mammen, Meret Oppenheim, Julia Margaret Cameron, Sonia Delaunay, Eva Hesse, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp were highlighted.⁹ The second segment of the exhibition showcased contemporary women artists from various European countries and the United States, featuring notable figures such as VALIE EXPORT, the author of the 1972 Feminist Manifesto (VALIE EXPORT, 1972, pp. 55-57), Judith Chicago, Marina Abramović, Louise Bourgeois, Louise Nevelson, Diane Arbus, Helen Frankenthaler, and Miriam Schapiro. Italian women artists held a significant presence, with artworks from eighteen of them prominently displayed across the three exhibition ven-

⁹ Awareness of their own cultural tradition serves as a crucial foundation for women's self-perception and confidence in their abilities. The historical segment of the exhibition aimed to showcase the continuity of women's artistic output, an essential prerequisite for the success of female artists. While adequate attention was given to emerging forms of artistic expression such as performance, film, and video, they were not explicitly acknowledged as feminist media. For instance, several photographs captured by the photographer Abisag Tüllmann, archived at the Bildarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz, depict female activists and artists engaging in musical performances and body painting actions.

ues, accompanied by an extensive section dedicated to them in the catalogue¹⁰. Simona Weller's text *Il complesso di Michelangelo* published in 1976 (Weller, 1976), served as a major source of inspiration for the exhibition, with a detail of Weller's artwork chosen as the cover image.

The project faced the challenge of selecting from a vast array of available material, compounded by changes in the curatorial team over the years. Paradoxically, the feminist content was considered secondary, leading to the exclusion of provocative protests from feminist demonstrations and activist art that eschewed aestheticism. This curatorial decision sparked discussions within the team and with invited female artists and the feminist audience. Further complexity arose from the decision to exhibit works in different venues according to a hierarchical structure. (Kaiser, 2013, p. 145). Works by historic and less politically charged female artists were displayed in the main venue of the Orangerie, while more critical and activist pieces were divided between the NGbK and the Haus der Kunstbibliothek. Additionally, the use of white walls to display the works, a spatial approach akin to the 'White Cube' formula favored by male curators, drew criticism from female critics. They argued that the curators failed to devise alternative solutions that deviated from the conventions established by male artists and critics.

The catalogue serves as a crucial resource for gaining a deeper insight into this exhibition. As previously noted, it begins with an introduction penned by Ursula Bierther and the other curators, delving into the project's history and the challenges encountered during its realization. Reflecting the critical nature of the selection and organization of the artists' works, the catalogue itself is somewhat uneven, with entries written by various authors varying in length, form, and content. The catalogue is divided into two main sections: the first, larger section is dedicated to historic women protagonists, providing comprehensive biographies of the female artists. The second part focuses on feminist and women's art of the past fifteen years, featuring short biographies of the exhibited artists categorized by their country of origin.

¹⁰ The eighteen women artists in the exhibition were: Mirella Bentivoglio, Nilde Carabba, Deanna Frosini, Iole de Freitas, Giosetta Fioroni, Nedda Guidi, Titina Maselli, Verita Monselles, Stephanie Oursler, Lucia Pescador, Antonietta Robotti Antonioli, Ketty La Rocca, Suzanne Santoro, Silvia Truppi, Thea Valle, Anna Vancheri, Nanda Vigo and Simona Weller. Bierther, *et. al* (1977).

Of particular importance within the text are some critical essays, such as the German translation to Lucy Lippard's seminal book, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art*, published in 1976¹¹. In this essay, Lippard, an American feminist art critic, contends that women's artistic work must be considered independently from the ideological assumptions of the Avant-garde, which had dominated the artistic landscape of the early twentieth century and represented patriarchal culture in art. She argues that feminist culture cannot be confined within the confines of capitalist culture, which is more suited to male art. According to Lippard, the construction of an audience that fully comprehends feminist art is itself a political and creative act. The inclusion of Lippard's work in the catalogue of *Künstlerinnen* was deliberate, as she was one of the most influential feminist critics and activists of the time. By endorsing the 'separatist' thesis of exhibiting feminist art, Lippard supported women artists who chose to showcase their work in feminist exhibitions devoid of male presence. In doing so, the curators of *Künstlerinnen* responded to the controversy surrounding the exhibition and affirmed their commitment to feminist principles.

In her essay *Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Frau und Kreativität* (Reflections on the Relationship between Women and Creativity), VALIE EXPORT tackled a highly discussed topic of the time: the connection between creativity and feminist art (VALIE EXPORT in Bierther, *et al.*, 1977, pp. 100-104). The Austrian artist posited that creativity was merely a social construct derived from institutional power. She argued that academic critics were tailored for men, excluding women from the realm of creativity, as it was predominantly associated with productivity. This perspective implied a relative productivity of creativity for women, as in a male-dominated society, creativity was evaluated based on male-centric norms and behaviors.

Reconstructing the exhibition today presents considerable challenges due to discrepancies between the works displayed and those documented in the catalogue¹². Among the most contentious pieces within the

¹¹ The essay was also republished in "Art Journal", Summer 1976, vol. 35, no. 4, pp. 337-339.

¹² Here, there is a noticeable absence of an in-depth study that thoroughly reconstructs the exhibition, particularly by shedding light on the works on display. This should encompass not only those related to traditional artistic genres such as painting, sculpture, photography, and graphics but also delve into the artists' performances held during the exhibition, as well as installations and video art pieces featured. Furthermore, comprehensive re-

feminist works category is the extensive photographic documentation by artist and critic Marianne Wex (1937-2020), titled *Weibliche und männliche Körpersprache als Folge patriarchalischer Machtverhältnisse* (Female and Male Body Language as a Consequence of Patriarchal Power Relations). Wex's investigation, first exhibited in Berlin, had been underway since the early 1970s. It focused on the contrasting bodily behaviors of men and women, drawing from nearly six thousand photographs taken in and around Hamburg, of which around two thousand were presented. Accompanied by studies on the historical evolution of postural representations of the sexes from ancient sculpture to contemporary mass media images, Wex's work aimed to document and analyze the different poses adopted by men and women, highlighting how the assertion of patriarchal power is reflected through body language.

Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977: the background

The Charlottenburg exhibition stands as the apex of a series of feminist art events and exhibitions organized between Austria and West Germany starting from 1972. This year marked a significant turning point in the development of feminist art and the subsequent reevaluation of women artists within art history. In 1972, the feminist performance artist VALIE EXPORT published "Women's Art: A Manifesto" in the magazine "Neues Forum". In this manifesto, the Austrian artist analyzed the cultural and social implications of Western male domination in the arts, asserting that male artistic authority had established a pervasive visual language that shaped human perceptions. Another milestone in 1972 was the exhibition "American Women Artists" at the Kunsthau in Hamburg, the first exhibition of contemporary American women artists in Europe. The catalogue of this exhibition inspired German women artists, informing them about the emancipation movement of their counterparts overseas. In 1975, VALIE EXPORT curated the exhibition *Magna Feminismus: Kunst und Kreativität* at the St. Stephan Gallery in Vienna, accompanied by a conference featuring an international roster of lectures¹³. The exhibition

search should extend to encompass the numerous talks and meetings that occurred concurrently with the exhibition.

¹³ The exhibition project faced rejection several times until it was finally accepted by the new director of the Galerie St. Stephan, Prof. Oberhuber. This exhibition aimed to spotlight works by Austrian artists such as Hilde Absalon, Renate Bertlmann, Friedl Bondy (Kubelka), Birgit Jürgenssen, Maria Lassnig, Friederike Pezold, Cora Pongracz, Meina Schel-

showcased contemporary female art and aimed to stimulate discourse around feminism and creativity.

The following year, 1976, saw the exhibition “Frauen machen Kunst” at the Galerie Philomene Magers, curated by art historian Margarethe Jochimsen. This was the first exhibition in West Germany dedicated to feminism and art. Philomene Magers recognized the talent of numerous female artists within the contemporary art scene and sought to showcase both feminist and non-feminist art to provoke discussions within feminist groups. The exhibition featured artists such as Irma Blanck, Hanne Darboven, Judy Chicago, Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Ulrike Rosenbach, and Katharina Sieverding. It aimed to challenge conventional female representations, deconstruct stereotypes, and redefine the role of women in art and society¹⁴.

The exhibition faced significant criticism, particularly from the artists themselves. Ulrike Rosenbach, in a letter featured in the catalogue, openly objected to the label “feminist art” attributed to her exhibited work. She argued that “feminist art” represented a new form of traditional artistic reception, emphasizing that feminist art should embody entirely new artistic expressions rather than merely constituting a new artistic direction. Furthermore, art historian Gisliind Nabakowski sharply criticized the exhibition and its artworks, contending that they perpetuated hierarchical spatial regulations inherent in patriarchal norms. Nabakowski argued that such structures contradicted the solidarity principles of the feminist movement.

These critiques shed light on the complex debates and internal tensions within the feminist art movement regarding the interpretation and representation of feminist ideals within artistic practice (Nabakowski, Sander, Gorsen, 1980; Kaiser, 2013, p. 150).

lander and Karin Schöffauer. In addition, music by Dorothy Iannone and Franca Sacchi was performed, and video works by Valie Export, Rebecca Horn, Muriel Olesen, Friederike Pezold, Ulrike Rosenbach and Katharina Sieverding were screened. (VALIE EXPORT, 1975).

¹⁴ The existence or non-existence of a feminist aesthetic was a widely debated topic in feminist art criticism at the time, as evidenced by texts from prominent figures such as Lucy Lippard, the French Aline Dallier, and the German scholar Silvia Bovenschen. See Lippard 1976; Dallier, 1974; Bovenschen, 1976.

Künstlerinnen International: art and feminist criticism

For the first time in West Germany, Künstlerinnen International immediately achieved the commendable feat of presenting a comprehensive retrospective on the significance of female artistic creativity. The initial organizers successfully fulfilled their aim of showcasing an international tradition of women's art and challenging the patriarchal notion that women lacked creativity, while also displaying remarkable artworks. This achievement gains significance when considering that Germany's foremost exhibition on contemporary art, *documenta Kassel*, in its 1972 fifth edition curated by Harald Szeemann, featured a female participation rate of only around five percent. Criticism of the exhibition primarily centered on the selection criteria for artists, which were perceived as perpetuating the male-dominated perspective of traditional art critics. These parameters failed to align with the utopian ideal of solidarity characteristic of many feminist groups. Critics were less concerned with addressing the historical aspects of women's art.

While the curators had access to various recent studies, such as the 1975 publication by Petersen and Wilson titled *Women Artists: A Historical Survey / Early Middle Ages to 1900* it is noteworthy, as Monika Kaiser also pointed out, that the organizers of Künstlerinnen may not have had the opportunity to review the catalogue of the Los Angeles exhibition, *Women Artists 1550-1950*, which arrived in Germany around the same time as the opening of their exhibition (Kaiser, 2013, p. 140).

Several critical perspectives argued that the label of feminist art didn't necessarily equate to quality art. Instead, it was suggested that the excessive focus on feminist art sometimes overshadowed the broader political and social demands of the feminist movement itself. The Berlin Women's Centre, in particular, lamented the perceived lack of overtly feminist messages in the exhibited art and advocated for a more inclusive and open presentation of contemporary women artists' works. Silvia Bovenschen, who had been indirectly involved in the exhibition's planning, responded to the Women's Centre's criticisms in the Berlin women's newspaper *Courage*. She defended the exhibition and its selection criteria, which aimed to present a different image of women than the prevailing one at the time. Bovenschen viewed the exhibition as a successful survey of women's art, highlighting the patriarchal exclusions that had historically characterized the art world (Bovenschen, 1977, p. 42). In

her essay *Über die Frage: Gibt es eine 'weibliche' Ästhetik?* ("Is There a Feminine Aesthetic?") published in autumn 1976, Bovenschen further explored these themes. She emphasized how the art world had long been dominated by men who established and enforced standards for evaluating creativity. Even when women entered the art sphere, they often adhered to these pre-existing criteria. However, Bovenschen argued that this wasn't always the case, and it was crucial for women to reclaim moments in history when female cultural potential was prevalent but silenced by patriarchy (Bovenschen, 1976, p. 118).

Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977: some final considerations

In the European context, *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* represented the first comprehensive survey of women's art that established the significance of women artists within the broader history of art, acknowledging both historical achievements and contemporary contributions, particularly within the feminist movement. By placing women artists within a historical timeline, the exhibition provided crucial attention to the narrative of women's art and legitimized the presence of contemporary women artists.

However, the project faced challenges due to its lack of uniqueness, stemming from the frequent changes and internal dynamics within the *Frauen in der Kunst* group, which curated the exhibition. Many of these women were artists themselves rather than professional curators. Despite facing criticism from some feminist groups, one of the exhibition's key strengths was its prioritization of aesthetic quality in the artwork. This stance challenged a prevailing dogma within the male-dominated German art system, which had emphasized the idea that anyone could be an artist since Joseph Beuys declared it in the late 1960s. The message conveyed was that artistic quality and creativity were not gender-specific, advocating for equal representation of both genders in official art institutions and fair treatment in the art market.

Nevertheless, despite its significance, the exhibition's historical legacy has faded somewhat from collective memory, partly due to discontent among feminist groups. Additionally, many contemporary women artists were dissatisfied with being relegated to secondary exhibition spaces compared to the more prestigious Orangerie, leading to accusations of censorship by the organizers. These factors have contributed to the lim-

ited historiography surrounding the exhibition, reflecting its complex and controversial reception within the feminist art community.

The intended message of *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* was to emphasize that artistic quality and creativity should not be tied to gender. Both men and women deserved equal representation in official art institutions and fair treatment in the art market. However, despite its significance, the exhibition's historical legacy has faded from collective memory for several reasons.

One major factor is the discontent among feminist groups, who were dissatisfied with various aspects of the exhibition. Many contemporary women artists felt marginalized by being relegated to secondary exhibition spaces compared to the more prestigious Orangerie. This perceived discrimination led to accusations of censorship by the organizers, further exacerbating tensions within the feminist art community.

Moreover, the exhibition's absence from the list of group exhibitions may be attributed to the controversies and debates it sparked. Despite the shared goal of challenging patriarchy, the exhibition highlighted the challenges of women's associations and the complexities of feminist collective memory. Some feminists criticized the exhibition format for aligning with patriarchal models, while others objected to the curatorial collective's exclusion of body painting, video art, and performance art as genuine feminist genres. This exclusion contradicted the artistic practices of many contemporary women artists who worked with these mediums, such as VALIE EXPORT and Marina Abramović.

Overall, the diverse criticisms and controversies surrounding *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* have contributed to its limited historiography and its gradual disappearance from collective memory, highlighting the challenges of representing feminist art movements and their legacies¹⁵.

Indeed, *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* played a significant role in fostering connections and strengthening ties between European feminist artists, particularly those from West Germany, Austria, and Italy. The exhibition served as a platform for showcasing the works of artists from different countries and provided an opportunity for cross-cultural dialogue and comparison.

¹⁵ The author is currently conducting a comprehensive study of the performances, video art works, and an attempt to reconstruct the exhibition as a project within the framework of the Heinrich Heine Universität in Düsseldorf.

Prior to the exhibition in Charlottenburg, there were already instances of collaboration and exchange between European feminist artists. For example, exhibitions like *Coazione a mostrare* in 1974 and *Magma* in 1975 featured artists from Germany, Austria, and Italy, contributing to the growing network of feminist artists across borders. The inclusion of eighteen Italian women artists in the Charlottenburg exhibition underscored its transnational character and highlighted the importance of international collaboration within the feminist art movement. This participation not only provided exposure for Italian artists but also facilitated interactions and exchanges with their counterparts from other European countries.

Furthermore, the exhibition served as a precedent for subsequent events and exhibitions focused on women's art, such as Mirella Bentivoglio's *Materializzazione del linguaggio* in 1978 and Lea Vergine's *L'altra metà dell'avanguardia* (1980). These exhibitions continued the conversation around feminist art and further contributed to the visibility and recognition of women artists in Europe.

Overall, *Künstlerinnen International 1877-1977* played a crucial role in fostering transnational solidarity among feminist artists and contributed to the ongoing dialogue and exchange within the feminist art community across Europe.

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