

CAS Study Day: Curating Feminist Technologies 20 March 2019, De La Warr Pavilion Bexhill-on-Sea

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On 20 March, around 40 or so CAS museum and artist members gathered at the De La Warr Pavilion in Bexhill-on-Sea for an afternoon of talks and discussions on the theme of 'Curating Feminist Technologies'. The context for the event was the fascinating and ambitious exhibition 'Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance, Act 2', an exhibition that was presented last winter in a slightly different version at Nottingham Contemporary. After a tour of the exhibition led by Rosie Cooper, Head of Exhibitions at De La Warr Pavilion, attendees gathered on the top floor of the pavilion, where a view of the sea provided a meditative backdrop for an afternoon of presentations that included a talk by cultural theorist D-M Withers, a conversation between Cooper and artist Tai Shani, and a panel discussion titled 'Activating Feminisms', with the following participants: curator Tara Londi, who recently curated the all-woman exhibition 'Mademoiselle' at the Centre Régional Art Contemporain Occitanie/Pyrénées-Méditerranée; Darian Khan, founder of London's Mimosas House, a space dedicated to showing art by women and queer artists; and Phoebe Cripps, Assistant Curator at De La Warr Pavilion.

'Still I Rise' includes works by more than 50 practitioners from around the world and approaches resistance movements via the perspective of gender. While the Nottingham version of the show focused more on visual art, at De La Warr Pavilion there is a distinct emphasis on design, architecture and technology, in tune with the pavilion's renown as an architectural treasure. The exhibition explores a range of feminisms – some of which are discordant – and keeps a close eye on intersectionality. The result is an inclusive exhibition that features work by women, men and non-binary artists, and approaches its chronologies in a nonlinear way. Cooper explained that mind maps were an essential tool for the curatorial team in plotting out a multitude of practices and philosophies, to generate what she described as 'a unity of voices across space and time'. Co-curating is a strategy Cooper has privileged through recent curatorial collaborations with Camden Arts Centre, CCA Goldsmiths and Nottingham Contemporary, as a way of 'involving more brains and getting huge projects like this one out there.'

For their talk, 'Trans-Mission: How Feminism Moves Across Space and Time', D-M Withers echoed the anti-linear approach of the exhibition, couching a discussion of feminist archives in terms of inheritance, and citing philosopher Bernard Stiegler's concept of the 'already-there', which refers to 'material inscriptions that pre-exist us and help us make sense of the world'. Withers posited the archive as a space in which we can inhabit different times simultaneously.

Although there is an abundance of feminist concepts in circulation, many of them have not been integrated into practice, or built into social structures, and delving into archives may help us to do so. Withers gave the example of the Feminist Archive, established in 1978, and now held at the University of Bristol. The Feminist Archive is a key tool in understanding the development of feminist thought and practice in the UK. It was classified according to new descriptive categories, which sought to remedy the erasure of women's lives in accounts of history.

Archives present many challenges, according to Withers, and it is often difficult to access archives that hold key information and examples of counter-cultural ideas in practice. During their talk, Withers made a plea to artists to shift their attention from established collections and published catalogues to a wider sphere that includes archives of all kinds, in order to bring together previously unconnected elements and to transmit feminist histories across space and time. These 'autonomous infrastructures' of feminist archives are our inheritance, Withers said, they are our 'already-there', which we need to recognise, care for and make more widely available. Nevertheless, archives are often just 'people's stuff' and, as such, they are susceptible to being neglected or thrown away. The most important thing, Withers advised, is to gather what is available and get it somewhere safe as soon as possible.

In conversation with Cooper, artist Tai Shani, elements of whose multi-media installation 'Semiramis' have featured in different guises in both iterations of 'Still I Rise', spoke about her ideas and the processes involved in the project. Speculative thinking – which Cooper described as a potential feminist technology 'to imagine alternatives to the patriarchy' – is a large part of Shani's approach, which draws on wide-ranging influences such as medieval history, early gothic fiction written by women, science fiction and feminist histories. Research is central to Shani's process, providing her with the terms to produce the work, and informing the project, which overtly references 15th century author Christine de Pizan's 'The Book of the City of Ladies'. Shani has reclaimed and reworked feminist histories into media as varied as video, sculpture, performance and virtual reality.

The conversation was also a chance for Shani to speak more candidly about how discussions around gender and pressures to conform to gender stereotypes have evolved during her lifetime, from the time when she was a teenager – "when my life was geared towards being palatable" – to her 30s – when "I moved out of the eye of the storm". Gender is a central discourse of our time, and even in the past few years things have changed radically and continue to evolve at a rapid pace. As a consequence, society, individuals, and artists are reassessing past work and current ideas and behaviours, and Shani is no exception. As she explained: 'my politics have shifted so much in the time of making 'Semiramis': I don't even want to call it a city of women anymore. Let's call it a post-patriarchal project.'

Daria Khan, who started off the roundtable discussion, introduced Mimosa House, a project space in London which she founded in 2017 to host a programme of intergenerational projects by female and queer artists. Initially a self-funded project, Mimosa House has since received support from Arts Council England. Khan intends it to be a safe space for artists and audiences, in which she aims to do more than just retell histories. She wants to provide a space for healing, a 'place where people won't be interrupted or offended.'

Curator Tara Londi discussed her exhibition 'Mademoiselle', which gathered the work of 37 women artists to pay tribute to the #MeToo movement. 'Mademoiselle' drew on art historian Amelia Jones's notion of 'parafeminism', which Jones uses to consider gender "as a question rather than an answer, and a question that percolates through other subjective and social identifications – sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on – which can never be fixed but always take meaning in relation to each other." Putting on a woman-only exhibition was seen as a controversial move by some, and Londi explained that she did not receive much support for the idea. Indeed, she was challenged and even criticised for it, including by the late Agnès Varda, who claimed that "You are putting women in a ghetto."

If that's the case, then it raises the question of how the categories of 'man' and 'woman' might be relevant to contemporary feminism? As Withers commented in the general discussion that followed: "Feminism is a struggle for the feminised. The words 'man' and 'woman' are not part of the term." Yet the audience for the CAS study day was overwhelmingly female. This reflects the gender imbalance in the art world, where around 70% of museum curators are women, but museum directorship tends to be more male-dominated. However, the message of the study day needs to reach a wider audience if it is going to produce a more equitable society. As Shani pointed out, 'the patriarchy can't be dismantled by women. Men have to do that work.' The recent interest in feminism in artistic and curatorial practice is helping to raise public awareness and prompt recognition of gender imbalances and wider structural inequalities, but engagement with these issues needs to come from all quarters if it is going to produce change.