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A Feminist Avant-Garde

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**About the author(s)**

is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History at the University of Edinburgh. Her scholarly and curatorial work focuses on Surrealism, and modern and contemporary women artists. Her books and exhibitions include *The Traumatic Surreal: Germanophone Women Artists and Surrealism after the Second World War* (2022), *Lee Miller: Photography, Surrealism and Beyond* (2016), and *Angels of Anarchy: Women Artists and Surrealism* (Manchester Art Gallery, 2009).

Cover image: **Fig. 2** From the series *Isolamento*, by Renate Eisenegger. 1972. Black-and-white photograph, 40 by 29.5 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

# A Feminist Avant-Garde

by Patricia Allmer • 17.08.2022

*A Feminist Avant-Garde: Photographs and Performances of the 1970s from the Verbund Collection, Vienna*, curated by Gabriele Schor, constitutes the main exhibition of the 53rd Rencontres d'Arles. It continues the photography festival's dedication to address its gender and racial imbalance, which began in 2018 when the collective *La Part des femmes* sent an open letter to the former Director Sam Stourdzé, campaigning against the lack of women photographers.<sup>1</sup> This request was translated into reality under the programming of Christoph Wiesner, who assumed the role of Director in 2020. Hosted in La Mécanique Générale in the Parc des Ateliers, where the LUMA Foundation, Zürich, launched an interdisciplinary creative campus in 2013, *A Feminist Avant-Garde* is the first French staging of this touring exhibition. Comprising works from Austria's VERBUND COLLECTION, which Schor has grown with an emphasis on 1970s feminist art, it was first shown at La Galleria Nazionale, Rome, in 2010, and included the work of seventeen artists. As it has subsequently toured to many international venues, it has significantly expanded, as evident in Arles, where it includes seventy-one of the collection's eighty-five international and transcontinental artists, and over two hundred works of mainly photography, film and video.

Schor's strategy of expansion locates, archives and displays works by women artists active in the 1970s, many of whom have been marginalised or excluded from exhibitions and art-historical debate. Although the documentation of these artists and this history is one significant aim of the project, its continual growth resists a defined canon, instead (re)discovering artists, such as Renate Bertlmann (b.1943) and works, such as early photographs by ORLAN (b.1947). In response to location, the touring exhibition dynamically and organically changes in size, context and emphasis, and in Arles the focus is on film and photography. Size matters when it comes to the inclusion of women artists. This is also demonstrated by the catalogue, a substantial publication – typical for Schor's books, which include the 2021 expanded two-volume *Feminist Avant-Garde* (first published as single volume in German and English in 2015 and 2016, respectively) – beautifully illustrated with all the works in the exhibition and reinforcing the strategy of claiming space and presence for women artists.<sup>2</sup>

Echoes and repetitions among the works and concerns of artists from different nationalities play across five exhibition sections: 'Mother / Housewife / Wife'; 'Locked Up / Break Out'; 'Tyranny of

Beauty / Female Body'; 'Female Sexuality'; and 'Identity / Role-Play'. The first of these sections opens the exhibition with *I Want Out of Here!* **FIG.1** by Birgit Jürgenssen (1949–2003), a photographic self-portrait of the artist pressing her face and hands against a pane of glass, across which the titular words are written in German. A similar manifestation of confinement and escape appears in other works, such as a photograph from the series *Untitled (Glass on Body Imprints)* (1972/1997/2009) by Ana Mendieta (1948–85), *Against the Glass* (1982/2019) by Gabriele Stötzer (b.1953) and *Poemim (Series A)* (1978) by Katalin Ladik (b.1942). These images of pressed female skin reference invisible constraints, evoking the 'glass ceiling' often encountered by women. This challenging of the prison-house of patriarchy threads throughout the exhibition, returning in many works that utilise methods of confinement and restraint, for example, four works from the *nets* series (1980) by Anneke Barger (b.1939) and all eight of the *Isolamento* sequence **FIG.2** by Renate Eisenegger (b.1949).



**Fig. 1** *Ich möchte hier raus!(I Want Out of Here!)*, by Birgit Jürgenssen. 1976. Black-and-white photograph, 40 by 30 cm. (© Estate Birgit Jürgenssen; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Galerie Hubert Winter, Vienna; Bildrecht, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

The entanglement of isolation, restriction and motherhood is

analysed in the video work *Einwicklung mit Julia* (*Wrapping with Julia*) (1972), in which the artist Ulrike Rosenbach (b.1943) binds herself to her young daughter with bandages, an image that plays on bonds, bondage and the labour of motherhood; the German word *wickeln* refers to changing a child's nappy. Elsewhere, artists frequently represent themselves entrapped, for example, in Orshi Drozdik's (b. 1946) photographic documentation of her actionist performance in which she crawls out of a cage, *Individual Mythology. Cage* FIG.3, and *Sculpture #2* (1968) by Kirsten Justesen (b.1943), an (open) cardboard box with a photograph of the artist curled into a ball, whereas a nineteen-year-old ORLAN metaphorically breaks from the frames of art history in *Attempting to Escape the Frame* FIG.4.



**Fig. 2** From the series *Isolamento*, by Renate Eisenegger. 1972. Black-and-white photograph, 40 by 29.5 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

The systemic and systematic violence experienced by women is revealed in works that, as Schor puts it, range from 'the poetic-

subversive to the performative-offensive'.<sup>3</sup> This violence is often explored through repetition or seriality, for example the insistent chanting of '¡Negra! ¡Negra! ¡Negra! ¡Negra!' by Victoria Santa Cruz (1922–2014) in the 1978 recording of her poem *Me Gritaron Negra* (*They Called Me Black*), which counters the relentless repetition of racist and patriarchal violence. Similar references are also clearly laid out in the film and protest text *In Mourning and in Rage* (1977) by Suzanne Lacy (b.1945), which states: 'I am here for the half a million women who are being beaten right now in their homes. I am here for the thousands of women who are raped and beaten and have not yet found their voices'.



**Fig. 3** *Individual Mythology. Cage*, by Orshi Drozdik. 1976. Gelatin silver print, 27.4 by 21.4 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Knoll Galerie, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

In the 'Female Sexuality' section, *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) by VALIE EXPORT (b.1940) shows the artist wearing crotchless jeans and posing with a real machine gun – a critique of

the objectification of women in commercial cinema, through the male gaze. It is shown alongside a selection from the *Bride's Cake Series* (1973) by Penny Slinger (b.1947), in which the artist photographs herself as a parodic-erotic wedding cake. In *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You* FIG.5, Slinger's legs are splayed, her crotch collaged over with an image of a rolling wave covered by an eye. This is followed by Annegret Soltau's (b.1946) (purposefully mistitled) stitched photograph *Vagina I* (1978) FIG.6, in which an eye is sutured into a vulva, evoking the wounds encountered in the process of childbirth. These works are juxtaposed with a range of films, including *Consumer Art* (1972–75) by Natalia LL (1937–2022), in which acts of consumption are insistently eroticised, forming complex dialogues and interconnections, revealing the significance of touch and corporeality and showing the ways in which humour, irony and wit are significant tools of these artists' critiques.



Fig. 4 *Tentative pour sortir du cadre à visage découvert (Attempting to Escape the Frame)*, by ORLAN. 1966. Black-and-white photograph, 133.5 by 120 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Gallery Ceysson & Bénétière, Paris; Bildrecht, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

The universality of patriarchal oppression, evident in the transnational range of work, offers a strong argument for Schor's identification of a 'feminist avant-garde of the 1970s', reclaiming a term that has mainly been used to define a vanguard of experimental male artists. Demonstrating this collective concern of women across nationality, sexuality, race and class is more urgent given the current erosion of women's and human rights, evidenced most recently by the chilling reintroduction of United States anti-abortion laws. Such proposed collectivity does not underplay the remarkable nuances and distinctions between

individual artists. For example, *Free, White and 21* [Fig.7](#) by Howardena Pindell (b.1943) is a narration of the artist's personal experiences of institutional, organisational and social discrimination, mapping the relentlessness of the oppression that Black women are exposed to but which, as Pindell's film illustrates, are often explained away as unreal and 'paranoid' – another version of the invisible boundaries that surround women.

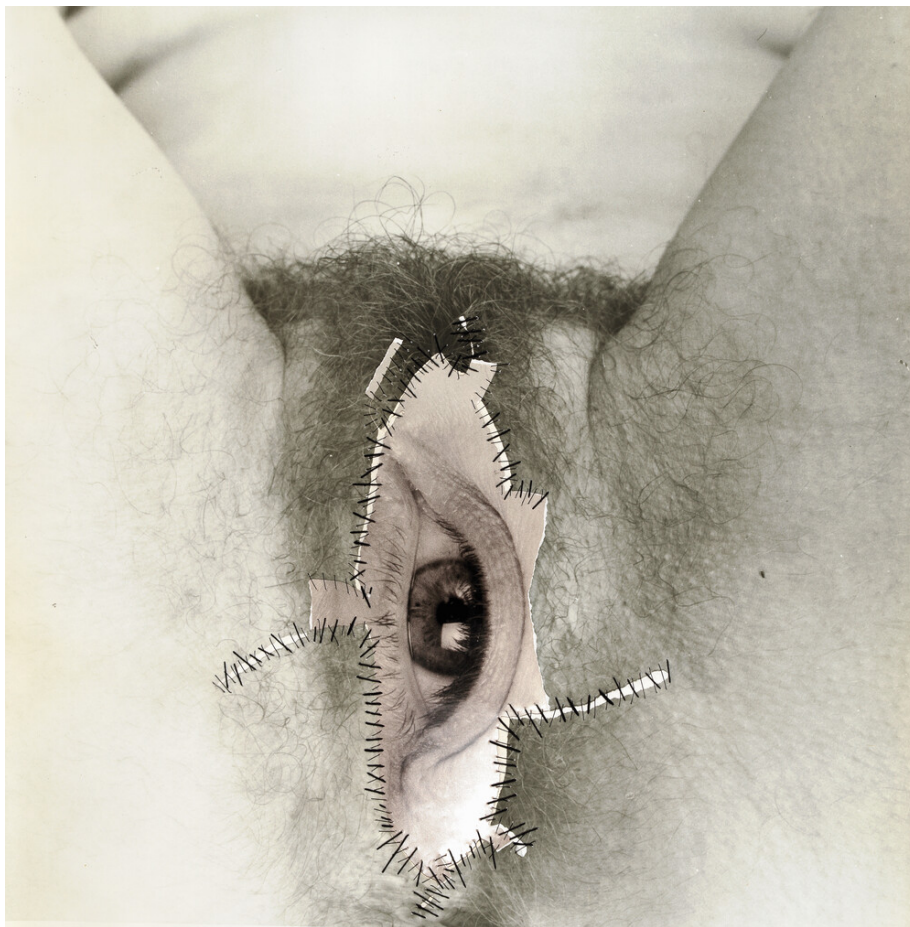


**Fig. 5** *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You* from the series *Bride's Cake Series*, by Penny Slinger. 1973. Photocollage, 40.6 by 30.5 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Blum & Poe, Los Angeles; Artists Rights Society, New York; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

This exhibition demonstrates that feminism dynamised a huge, global, politically astute avant-garde. In 2013 the painter and photographer Alexis Hunter (1948–2014) noted in a conversation with Schor that 'Feminist art is the most powerful theoretical movement in modern art, but much remains to be discovered'.<sup>4</sup>



This exhibition certainly performs this vital journey of discovery.



**Fig. 6** *Vagina I*, by Annegret Soltau. 1978. Photograph overstitched with black thread, 123.5. by 106.9 cm. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Anita Beckers, Frankfurt; Richard Saltoun Gallery, London; Bildrecht, Vienna; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).



**Fig. 7** Still from *Free, White and 21*, by Howardena Pindell. 1980. Video, duration 12 minutes and 15 seconds. (© the artist; VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna; courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery, New York; exh. Parc des Ateliers, Arles).

### Exhibition details

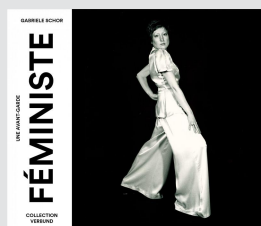
**A Feminist Avant-Garde: Photographs and Performances of the 1970s from the Verbund Collection, Vienna**

Rencontres d'Arles

Various locations, Arles

4th July–25th September 2022

### About this book



**Une avant-garde féministe –  
Photographies et performances des  
années 1970 de la collection Verbund**

By Gabriele Schor

delpire & co, Paris, 2022

ISBN 979-10-95821-48-9

## Footnotes

- 1** See 'Rencontres photo d'Arles: où sont les femmes?', *Libération* (3rd September 2018), available at [www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/09/03/rencontres-photo-d-arles-ou-sont-les-femmes\\_1676245](http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2018/09/03/rencontres-photo-d-arles-ou-sont-les-femmes_1676245), accessed 15th August 2022.
- 2** Catalogue: *Une avant-garde féministe – Photographies et performances des années 1970 de la collection Verbund*. By Gabriele Schor. 472 pp. incl. 495 col. + b. & w. ill. (delpire & co, Paris, 2022), €62. ISBN 979-10-95821-48-9.
- 3** *Ibid.*, p. 34, translation the author.
- 4** Alexis Hunter quoted from *Ibid.*, p.11.

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