Published as _*Perspective* in *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*
(ISSN 2366-4142)

How to Curate a Sexist yet Canonized Artwork? A Model for Feminist Curating of Collections

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Keywords

feminist curating, P is for Pussy, curating collections, The Bookstore Amsterdam, Het Kattenkabinet

Publication Date

Issue 13, May 05, 2023

How to Cite

Taya Hanauer. "How to Curate a Sexist yet Canonized Artwork? A Model for Feminist Curating of Collections." *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture* 13 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1298>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1298>

On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture
Issue 13 (2022): In_Visibilities
www.on-culture.org
https://doi.org/10.22029/oc.2022.1298

How to Curate a Sexist yet Canonized Artwork? A Model for Feminist Curating of Collections

_Abstract

This *_Perspective* reflects on the curatorial strategy employed in the DIY exhibition *P is for Pussy*, curated by myself in the artist community space *The Bookstore* in Amsterdam West in April 2017. Proposed here is a non-prescriptive curatorial methodology based on the case study of *P is for Pussy* and abstracted as a way of dealing with forms of social oppression represented in and by the art histories embodied in collections and archives. The methodology entails a change in approach to art within exhibition contexts and combines artistic, curatorial, and academic strategies in order to express critique of sexist representations by visibilizing underlying cultural values. *P is for Pussy* exhibited artworks featuring women and cats from the collection of *The Cat Cabinet* (Amsterdam), framed by prints from the history of Western art and juxtaposed with large, narrating wall texts in thematic groupings. The exhibition sought to convey the cognitive and sensorial experience of an argument and challenge accepted modernist modes of viewing and thinking about art. Breaking with both conventional and feminist curatorial consensuses, the greatly criticized concepts of 'authorial curating' and determinate argumentation lines within art and curating are brought here for their feminist potential to counter oppressive artworks without censoring them.

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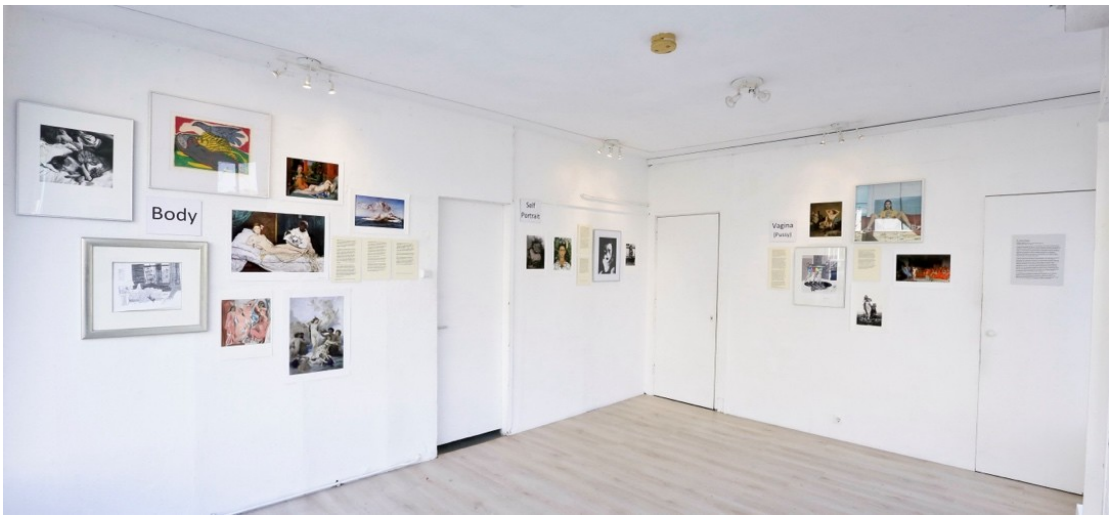

Fig. 1: Exhibition View (Body, Self-Portrait, Vagina (Pussy). Photo Credit: Taya Hanauer.

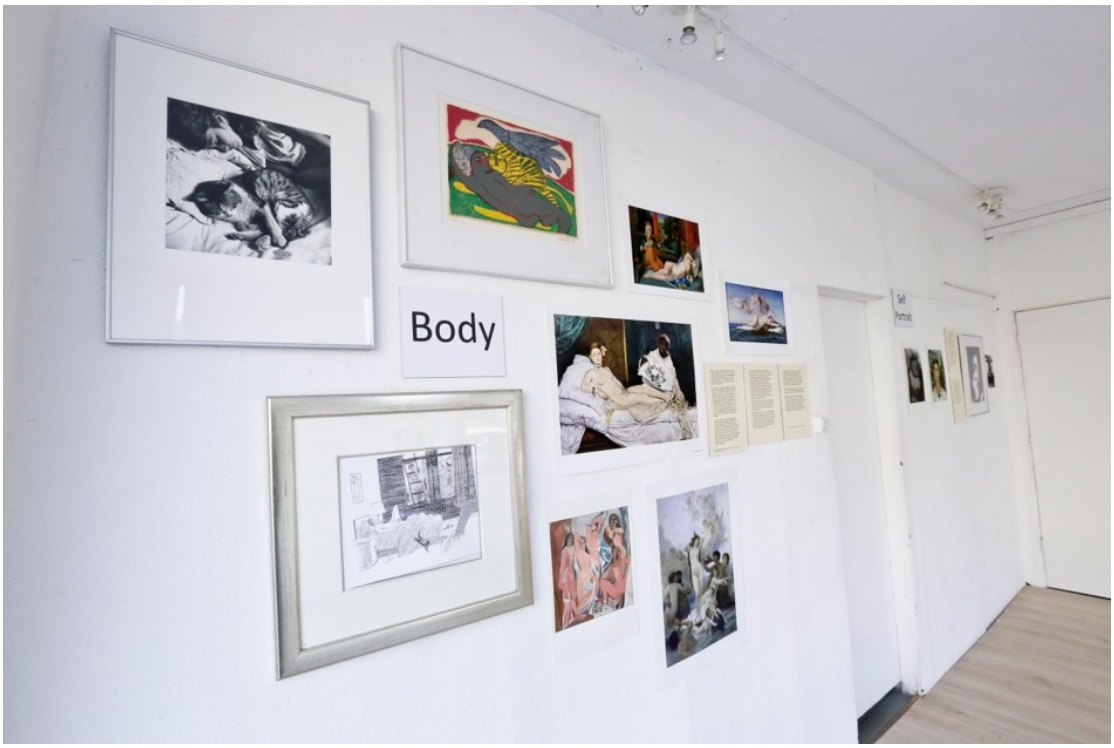

Fig. 2: Body Section. Photo Credit: Taya Hanauer.

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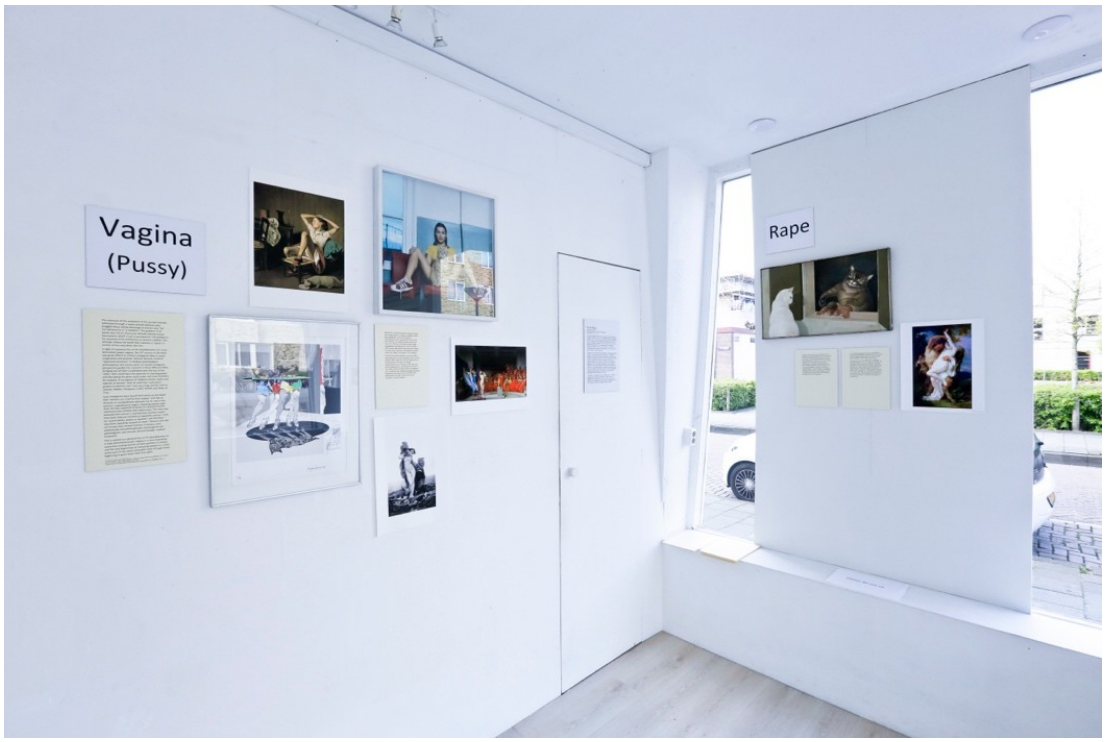

Fig. 3: Exhibition View (Vagina (Pussy), Rape). Photo Credit: Justina Nekrašaitė.

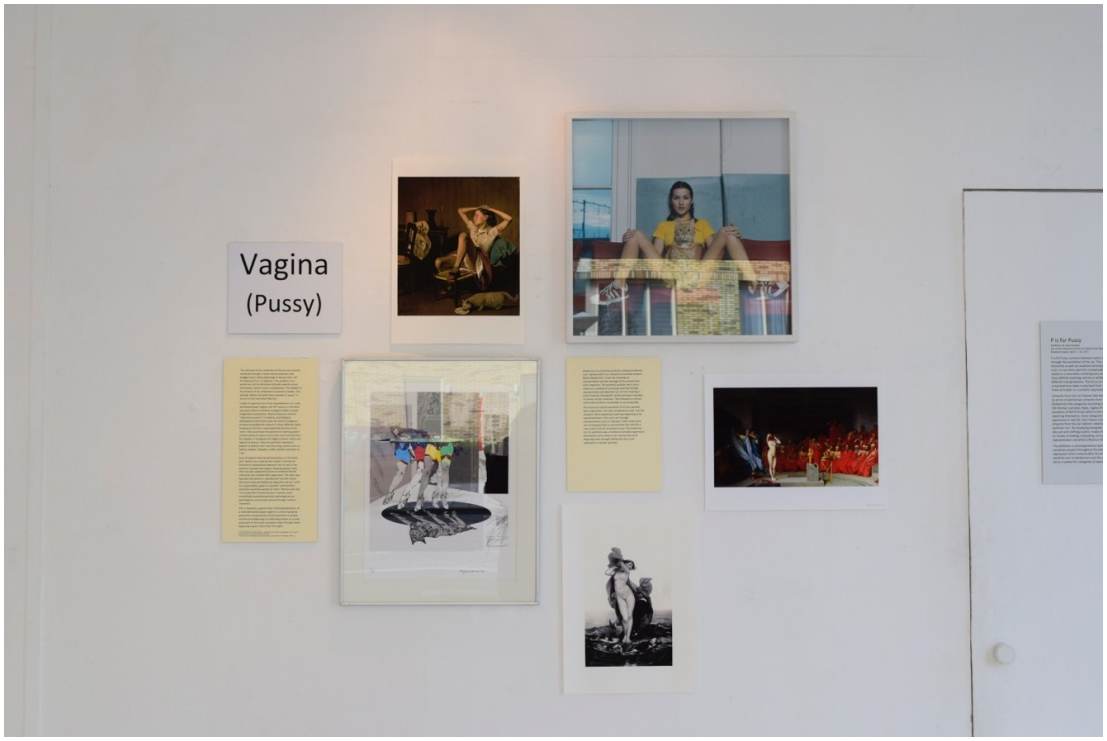

Fig. 4: Vagina (Pussy) Section. Photo Credit: Taya Hanauer.

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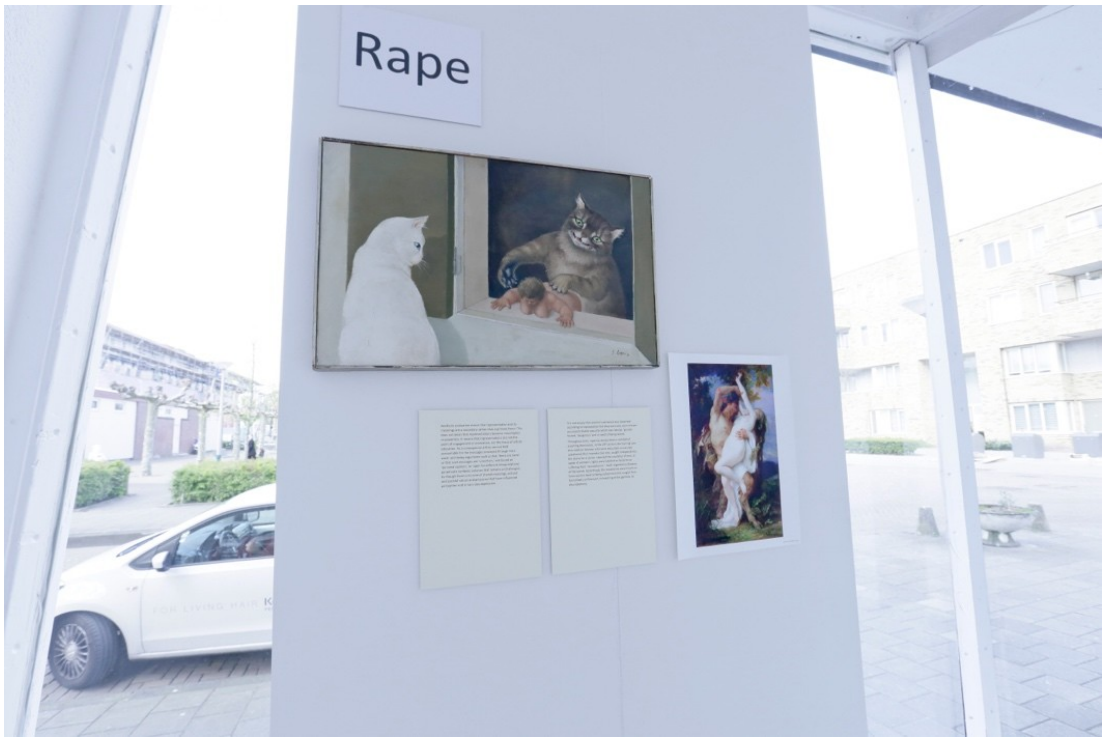

Fig. 5: Rape Section. Photo Credit: Justina Nekrašaitė.

Fig. 6: Exhibition View (Vagina (Pussy), Rape, Old Woman (Cat Lady)). Photo Credit: Justina Nekrašaitė.

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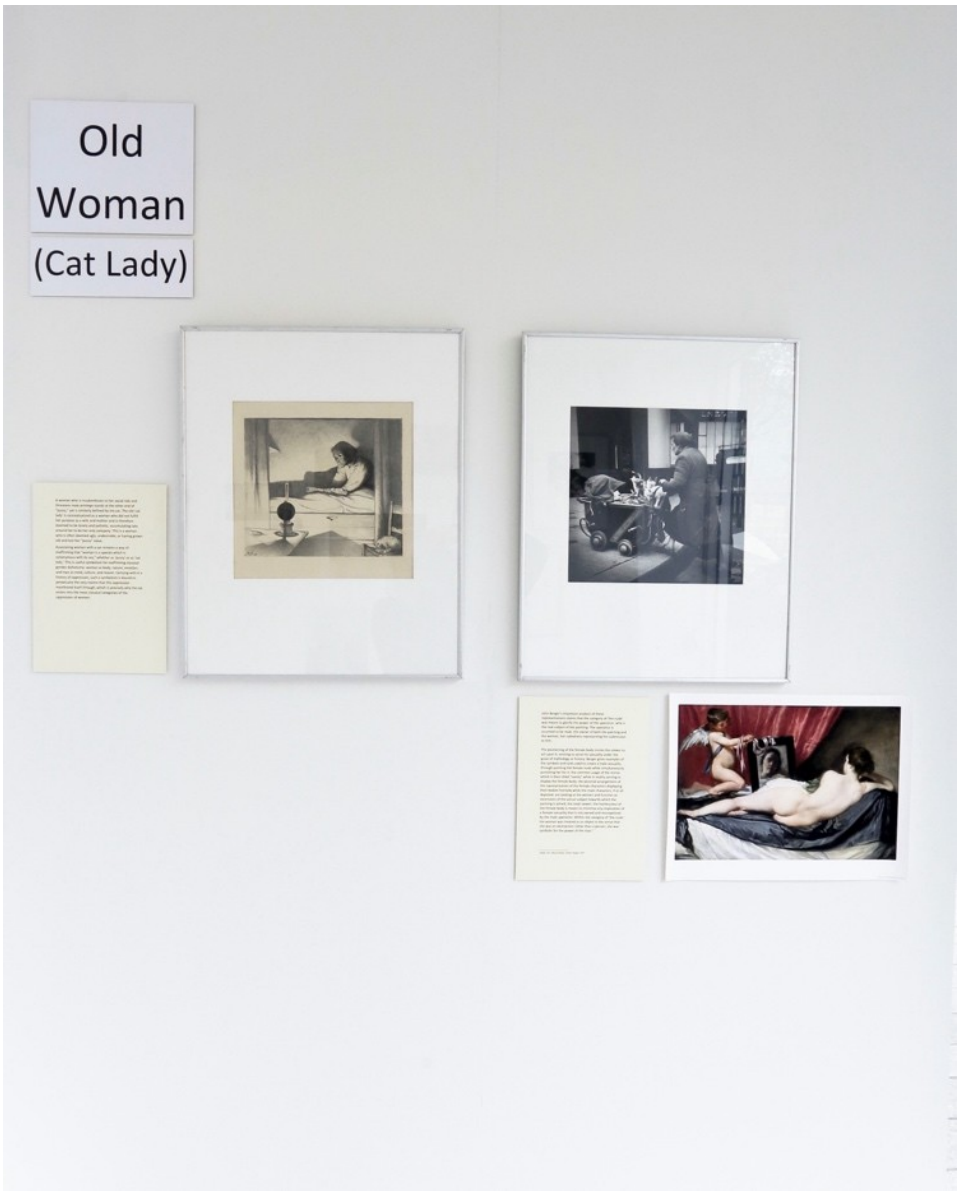

Fig. 7: Old Woman (Cat Lady) Section. Photo Credit: Taya Hanauer.

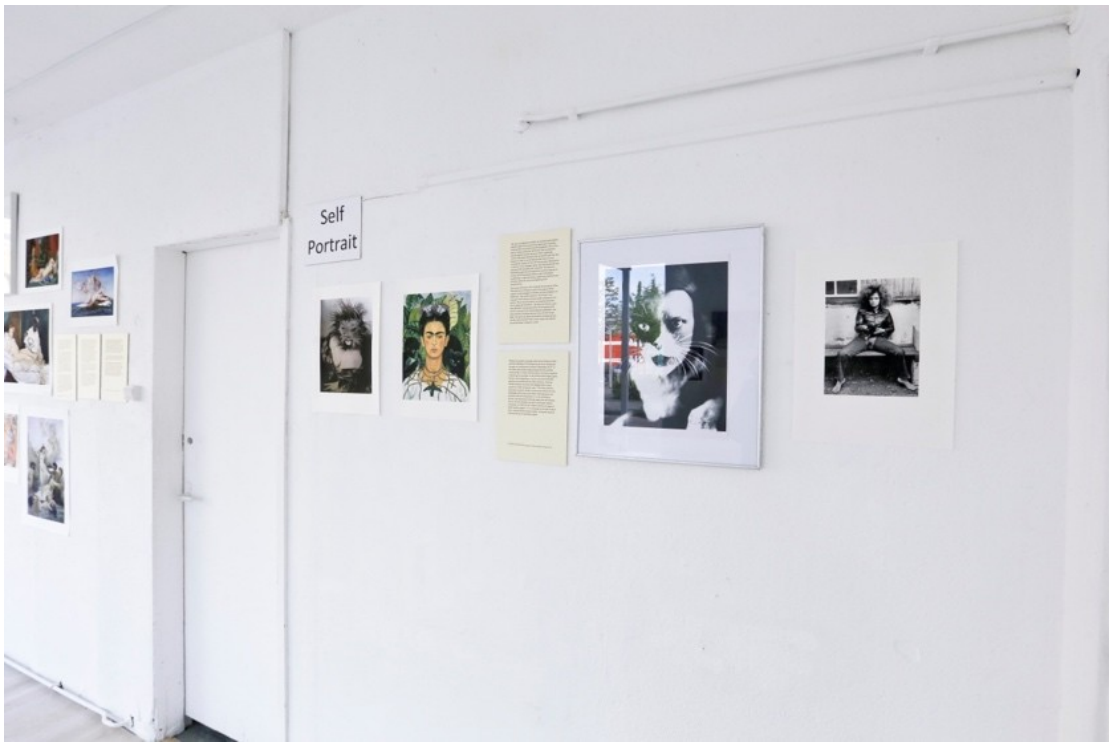

Fig. 8: Self-Portrait Section. Photo Credit: Justina Nekrašaitė.

1_Introduction

P is for Pussy[1] was an exhibition and research project curated by myself in the project space of the artist community *The Bookstore* in Amsterdam West, in April 2017. It displayed select artworks from the collection of *Het Kattenkabinet* (*The Cat Cabinet*) juxtaposed with prints of famous artworks from the canonized, Western history of art as well as textual narrations, and intertwined academic, curatorial, and artistic approaches. Its aim was to re-read the institutionalized art historical narrative of the artistic turn to Modernism as an oppressive turn through representations of women and cats. The combination of these three approaches was curatorially unconventional and uniquely tailored to deal with the subject of sexist[2] representations in the history and tradition of Western art.

This *_Perspective* reflects upon the curatorial methodology employed in the exhibition and how it can be used beyond the particular subject dealt with as a way of working with problematic[3] histories and content as they are manifested in archives, collections, and art histories. The proposed strategy is conceptual rather than a prescriptive step-by-step method. It entails a double perspective in the curatorial approach to artworks as both cultural artefacts of specific histories and subject positions, as well as sensorially provoking objects, which therefore can be analyzed in

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terms of underlying patterns of cultural values[4] rather than only as unique particularities. The contribution of this methodology is in rendering visible oppressive meanings and power structures naturalized in art in a way which contextualizes them rather than either censors or furthers their representational meanings. In particular, this is accomplished through redirecting the viewer's attention to frameworks of seeing that influence artistic creation and interpretation. The act of visibilizing in this framework is not equal to a simple revealing of sorts but is rather a constructive act which holds the potential to re-narrate curated histories. The contribution of this *_Perspective* lies also in positioning authorial curating and determinate arguments as a feminist strategy which is co-existent with aspects of indeterminacy and ambiguity characterizing many other feminist curatorial stances. This proposed curatorial method allows for the coexistence, and furthermore, co-dependence of both determinate arguments and the indeterminate or ambiguous for effective social critique in visual art.

As a caveat, it should be stated that the strategy proposed here runs the risk of being exploited for opposite purposes than intended: as a way of maintaining social oppressions through art while purportedly rendering them visible. I want to make clear that this strategy is certainly not suitable for all artworks containing problematic representations. This is especially true in the curating of contemporary art, where the option exists of simply not displaying certain artworks and thus not entering them into art history. The curatorial strategy proposed here is more suitable for art which already makes part of an institutionalized history (archive, collection, narrative) and should therefore not be erased or forgotten as such, but rather accounted for. In addition, this strategy is meant to work at rendering visible and re-narrating aspects of oppression in art which have been naturalized by discourses and ways of seeing. It is thus not meant to point out the obvious, that which has already been established as oppressive in dominant social and visual discourses, even if such aspects have not yet been properly accounted for either.

The first two sections of this *_Perspective* will introduce the exhibition *P is for Pussy*, its conceptualization, exhibition concept, and central argument in a summarized format before analyzing and extrapolating the curatorial methodology. The third and fourth sections are the main focus of this *_Perspective* as they explicate the curatorial methodology, its functioning, and its potentials for curating collections.

The central argument presented in the exhibition itself has been further elaborated on in the main catalogue essay,[5] briefly re-iterated here for the sake of specifying its connection, manifestation, and intertwining with the curatorial method.

2_Exhibition Concept: *P is for Pussy*

Through the exhibition *P is for Pussy* I was interested in constructing an argument about how aesthetic evaluations of art can perpetuate gender-based oppression in modern and contemporary Western art. Moreover, I was interested in (going beyond that and) positioning gender-based oppression as fundamental to the aesthetic art theory implicated within the canonized, art historical turn to Modernity in the global north.[6] My definition of the problem of sexism within modern art history, which I focused on in the exhibition, was that sexist representations have not been viewed and evaluated in relation to the social world and cultural values in which they were created and in which they participated. The argument I then constructed focused on the changes in art theory within the turn to modernity in order to explain the separation between aesthetics and the social world in the critique, creation, and perception of art. Beyond defining a problem and making an argument, *P is for Pussy* attempted to amend the problem by reconnecting sexist representations with historically rooted yet ongoing cultural values.

Although it might sound this way, the idea for the exhibition did not begin as a huge, theoretical argument. It sprung up within the context of working as a receptionist in a privately owned collection called *het KattenKabinet* (*The Cat Cabinet*) in Amsterdam. *The Cat Cabinet* is owned by a businessman, Bob Meijer, and situated in a canal house where he and his family live. It contains artworks and posters of cats of all kinds and is visited mainly by tourists. While working there, I looked at a massive collection of artworks and posters over a period of a few months and realized that the cat is much more than a cute or innocent way of attracting tourists—it is a cultural marker and a multifaceted symbol. One of the cat's most dominant symbolisms is of femininity, often in its most stereotypical varieties. These became thematic categories in my exhibition which were used as lenses to show modes of oppression under generalized titles: "Old Woman (Cat Lady)," "Rape," "Vagina (Pussy)," "Body," and "Self-Portrait."[7] Self-Portrait served as an important contrast to the other categories. It was the only category displaying artworks by

women artists depicting themselves. The cat was a tool for me, rather than my central focus. Its purpose was to accompany the viewing experience and to illuminate particularities within these different categories which femininity has been divided into, made up of, and which have served to constrain women as a social and legal category. It was also the symbol of the cat that led me to my argument about the aesthetic art theory implicated in the institutionalized turn to modernism as an oppressive turn. This arose from following the cat as a symbol for the feminine, which in turn led me to one of the central icons of Western modernity, Manet's *Olympia* (1863), displaying a black cat at Olympia's feet. *Olympia* became the theoretical center around which my argument was built and the catalogue essay was written.[8]

In *P is for Pussy*, I wanted to show that the Kantian aesthetic art theory[9] implicated in the canonized turn to modernity, was an oppressive, reactionary method, which in its changed artistic and evaluative approach created a disengagement between representation and social and cultural values and meanings. Firstly, this Modernist art theory functioned to pacify challenging representations so that their meanings would not be examined, subduing representational and thus moral challenges and a public discussion of these. This first part of my argument was formed around Manet's *Olympia,* and expanded beyond it.

Controversial rather than praised in its own time, *Olympia* was originally deemed a 'bad' painting for its realistic mode of depiction and unacceptable gendered values conveyed in its representations. Exhibited in the Paris Salon of the 19th century which valued Academic style painting and its depictions of idealized female nudes,[10] *Olympia* has been established in scholarship as a challenging, if not threatening, depiction of a white woman. It was my thesis in *P is for Pussy* that when oppression itself was beginning to be questioned both in life[11] and correspondingly in art through representations such as *Olympia* which imply partial empowerment or personhood for certain women in its own context and its own limited way[12], the need for a new mode of artistic evaluation arose. This allowed *Olympia* to eventually be canonized as one of the emblems of the modernist turn, noted for its flatness and painted strokes, the beginnings of the precedence of an aesthetic evaluation of art. Through this aesthetic evaluation, a challenging depiction posing the threat of social influence beyond the painting itself (because of the gendered meanings implied in its representations within

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that context), could be put back in her place, re-objectified and repressed again, like the accepted nudes of earlier centuries.

The second part of the argument was that the precedence accorded to aesthetics as the main means of the evaluation of art in Modernism, enabled 20th century male artists to continue portraying sexist tropes from previous centuries without any question as to their greatness, and under the protection of a canonized art history.[13] As such, sexist depictions by male artists could proceed in an undisturbed manner, their value no longer tied to an ethical appraisal[14] or a discussion of social implications within changing times. And there we have it, an art history of modernism with central icons from Picasso's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*,[15] his many reclining nudes and portraits of women, to Balthus' pedophilic depictions of his neighbor's young daughter, all denied a proper consideration of the representational content they contain because it is (considered) such great art!

3_*P is for Pussy* Display and Combined Artistic, Curatorial and Academic Exhibition Methodology

The exhibition took place at the project space of an artist community which I was part of at the time, *The Bookstore*, in Amsterdam West.[16] *P is for Pussy*'s exhibition display juxtaposed artworks from the collection of *The Cat Cabinet* with artworks from the canonized history of Western art in the form of prints. The display was divided into the five different categories listed above, with each category containing one to three artworks from the collection of *The Cat Cabinet*, framed (and contextualized) by well-known artworks sharing similar gendered, representational ideas and tropes from before and after the canonized Modernist turn.[17] Manet's 1863 *Olympia* served as a conceptual and approximate temporal threshold for this distinction of time periods, following centralized art historical narratives of Western art history.[18] The juxtaposition in *P is for Pussy* also included three types of large printed texts placed on the walls together with the artworks. The texts were equally significant rather than descriptive or secondary, contextualizing the artworks and the turn to modernity in social history and art theory and drawing parallels between the two.

In its juxtapositions of texts and artworks, the exhibition display sought to take the viewer through the experience of the argument, rather than straightforwardly exhibit the research. This means that the argument made in the exhibition was not simply

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displayed as such, in the form of highlighted passages from books and articles as is sometimes the case with research exhibitions in contemporary art contexts. It also did not utilize artworks to make a directly referential, didactic, and explanatory point, as is often found in educational exhibitions and which would be the equivalent of displaying the way artwork is written about in academic papers. The exhibition's mode of display, however, also purposely went against more conventional curatorial strategies, such as those we see in most modern and contemporary art exhibitions, in which artworks are neatly spread out, hung on large, empty walls and supplemented by small wall texts providing information about the artist's intentions, biography, and style. Such a display is in fact a modernist construction[19] which, unsurprisingly, emphasizes the uniqueness and irreducibility of the artwork and is complementary precisely to the aesthetic art theory criticized by *P is for Pussy*.

P is for Pussy's display focused on underlying similarities, not on uniqueness or on the artist's individual intentions through their artwork. The artworks were hung in groups, in close proximity, juxtaposed on top or around each other. They were placed together under the same theme, clearly written beside each category. The artworks were meant to be looked at in relation to each other, emphasizing the repetition of the same or similar gendered ideas and concepts consistently reproduced in different artworks across time often through shared visual tropes. The "Body" section set out the basis of the exhibition's central narrative and presented the male gaze in its art historical composition through the turn to modernity, with *Olympia* posed as a (conceptual) catalyst for changing artistic styles. "Body" grouped together artworks such as Manet's *Olympia*, placed in the center of the juxtaposition, Cabanel's *Venus*, Bouguereau's *The Birth of Venus*, Ingres's *Odalisque with Slave*, and Picasso's *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*, along with artworks from the collection of *The Cat Cabinet*, such as Ed van der Elksen's *Ata Kando Sevres*, Corneille's[20] *Naked with Tiger*, and an untitled work by cartoonist Peter van Straaten. In all these artworks the naked female body was positioned as a focal point, clearly centered and spread out towards the viewer or alternatively the Voyeur (in van Straaten's artwork, the masturbating voyeur), in the exact same two poses: suggestively lying down on a bed of sorts or standing with arms raised over the head, facing the viewer. The cat, present in many of the artworks, was likened to the sexualized female body representing a supposed female nature as tempting yet unattainable, and simply as a bestial sexuality. This

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pose epitomizes the male gaze in art history: female and male are positioned as binary opposites where body, nudity, and being seen signify the female as opposed to the unseen male, positioned as the one who has decision and action power and for whom the female body is intended.[21]

By placing artworks from before and after the modernist turn often from left to right, the juxtaposition in each category was intended to draw attention not only to the repetition of sexist cultural values implicit within the artworks, but also to their persistence and rebirth in changed artistic conventions, and to these artistic conventions in themselves. The Academic style paintings[22] depicting female nudes are clearly distinguished in their stylistic modes from the later, modernist ones; the brushstrokes remain invisible as the painting provides the illusion of another, ideal world, in which the female nudes are all non-distinct, pale white and young with long flowing hair. By contrast, the modernist artworks do not seek to portray an ideal illusion, emphasizing instead the flatness of the canvas, and the artificiality of lines and colors. Their naked women are not idealized nudes, they are either personified, bestial, or literal objects, and yet they maintain the same gendered tropes, compositions, and symbols, similar ideas about the feminine and about women's place in society. Through this display, the main difference rendered visible between these stylistic modes of depiction and the art theories which stand behind them, is the changing precedence of aesthetics from a tool serving the purpose of creating an illusion meant to communicate particular stories, meanings, and values, to aesthetics as the end in itself. The juxtaposition was meant to make visible a change in emphasis, from an art which often had a moral saying and was discussed and evaluated for its ethical implications through its aesthetic qualities, to an art valued and judged primarily for its aesthetic innovations, divorced from cultural and social implications and meanings.

While the stylistic mode of production and common subject matter of the artworks was intended to become visually focalized, rendering visible the frameworks of seeing art and common themes, the wall texts contextualized these frameworks and their problematics. Each section within the exhibition comprised wall texts which made part of the juxtaposition and complemented the exhibited artworks as equal participants rather than descriptive supplements. The wall texts were written by me, and addressed the social context of the artworks, their representational content and art

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theory through intentional narration which did not take on the pretense of a neutral position. The texts addressed specific themes: practices of 19th century oppression (providing the social context in which the academic artworks were made and in which the turn to modernity was formed); the aesthetic turn to modernism as it relates to representations of women; and the cat as a symbol of the different categories of oppression presented. Apart from Manet's *Olympia*, the texts did not directly refer to each artwork. The texts presented the exhibition's central themes and narratives in a clear way, yet leaving to the viewer the task of relating them directly to the exhibited artworks.

The "Body" section, discussed above, incorporated three texts laying out the exhibition's central argument by discussing Manet's *Olympia* as a catalyst of changing premises for the evaluation of art, from ethical to aesthetic, due to the gendered values she represented in correspondence to and within a period of women's movements. One of the texts also discussed the black woman functioning as a maid or servant and the space she occupied, as well as the gendered values in the accepted depictions of nudes in Academic style painting. In this section, the eye was guided towards seeing the changing artistic styles which maintain similar, gendered visual tropes, while the texts based the argument which explained the connection between these two: the artistic styles rendered visible through juxtaposition and categorization, and the artistic styles' relation to gender.

Another example, the "Rape" section, exhibited two artworks, S. Lepri's *Punishment* from the collection of *The Cat Cabinet*, and the Academic-style painting of Cabanel, *Nymph Abducted by Satyr* ('abduction' was the term used for rape in art history). Placed together under the heading of "Rape" these two artworks were emphasized in relation to each other through the commonality of their theme, a rape scene, and were thus brought out of their own logic and the aestheticization of the theme which had both naturalized and invisibilized its violence. In this way, their constructed worldviews, supported by their particular artistic modes, were also highlighted. The texts in this section could be read on their own in relation to the artworks, but also made sense as the continuation of a previous section, "Vagina (Pussy)," in which the re-enforcement of misogyny at the turn of the century within different fields (such as anthropology, biology, medicine) and as part of a backlash against women's rights, was complemented by a text discussing the artistic turn to

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modernity. Thus, the juxtaposition of the two texts created an intentional parallel between sociopolitical developments and artistic developments. The first text in the "Rape" section reads:

> It is not simply that women's existence was dissected according to reproduction but they were also seen to have an uncontrollable sexuality which was 'bestial,' greatly feared, 'dangerous' and in need of being tamed. Throughout time, rape has always been a method of asserting dominance. In the 19th century the 'taming' was also medical. Women who were educated, unmarried, questioned their reproductive role, sought independence, the desire for a career, rejected the courtship of men, or spoke of women's rights were labelled as hysterics or suffering from 'neurasthenia'—both regarded as diseases of the womb. Accordingly, the treatments were meant to force women back to being subservient and ranged from forced bed confinement, to leeching of the genitals, to clitoridectomy.[23]

This text was meant to contextualize Cabanel's 19th century artwork within the historical moment in which it was created, and emphasize the conditions of social backlash and re-enforcement of misogyny in which the emergence of a modernist art theory began to form. The second text in this section articulates the problematics of a changed art theory in relation to the representations depicted. It articulates the prism of seeing and creating in which Lepri's artwork partakes, and how it extends into contemporary art:

> Aesthetic evaluation means that representation and its meanings are a secondary rather than a primary focus. This does not mean that representations become meaningless or powerless. It means that representations are not the point of engagement or evaluation, nor the focus of artistic education. As a consequence artists are not held accountable for the messages conveyed through their work- and today arguments such as that 'there are none' or that such messages are 'uncertain,' and based on 'personal opinion,' or 'open for different interpretations' perpetuate symbolic violence that remains unchallenged. As though there is no core of shared meanings, cultural and societal values and pressures that have influenced perception and in turn also expression.[24]

I have provided this example of one of the sections to demonstrate the way in which artwork and text function together, complementing each other in order to convey the overall argument articulated in each section separately and in the exhibition as a whole. The artworks themselves, in their grouped and thematic juxtaposition, combining two different artistic modes of creation, visually emphasized the thematic, gendered content of the artworks. In dominant art historical discourses, gender as a thematic content of artworks has been either ignored by being subsumed within a modernist aesthetics, or perfectly legitimized in previous time periods in which 'oppression' was a mere fact rather than a problem to be dealt with. The texts'

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written content provided a context for the artworks which was meant to draw parallels between social history and art theory, narrating the specific emphases that the eye was guided towards seeing. The texts do not necessarily analyze or explain the individual artworks directly and extensively, but are rather meant to unfold the exhibition's argument alongside and in relation to the artworks, providing the viewer with both a direct point to be understood and simultaneously with the experience of it. Most significantly, this combination and usage of artwork and text was meant to both define a problem usually remaining invisible due to ways of seeing prescribed in institutionalized modernist art theory and carrying into the contemporary, but also to mend it by rendering visible that which it had meant to hide. This was executed, in this case, by reconnecting between social history, cultural values, and artistic representations.[25]

A final, but no less important aspect of the exhibition was the inclusion of a section entailing a counternarrative, the "Self-Portrait" section, in which women artists depicted themselves, and their artworks were displayed in linear fashion one next to the other. The differences between the two types of depiction was self-evident as the emphasis in the "Self-Portrait" artworks was on the face and expression rather than on the body, with the symbolism of the cat reclaimed. By showing another type of representation, and in many ways an opposing usage of the cat as a symbol for the feminine, this section was intended to show that the problematic representations in other sections are not categorically inherent to certain women or femininity, but rather have been imposed and then naturalized.

4_Curatorial Methods for Social Critique

P is for Pussy's focus on Modernity came out of the conviction that Kantian modernist art theory serves as a central pillar of a contemporary art which carries the same problems addressed in the exhibition, but in slightly updated formats. One of these problems presented itself in the unanimous criticisms by art practitioners which I received while working on the exhibition, a fact I find very telling. I was criticized precisely for seeking to convey an argument, for having something specific to say to the viewer. Such an intention is better reserved for academic writing or just writing in general, isn't it? Why exhibit an argument when you could just write it down? To me, this is a fundamental misunderstanding of what art is about, as well as an assumption

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which the exhibition implicitly critiques while attempting to engage the viewer differently. The assumption that art (including curating) should not convey intricate arguments because then, it (supposedly) becomes prescriptive and inhibits the viewer's imagination, is ever present in the neoliberal, contemporary artworld. This contemporary art expectation is manifested in a particular curatorial mode of display echoing a modernist realm of exception. In such a display, the artwork is treated as an irreducible, unexplainable, and unique entity as though outside of culture, to be seen in light of its incomparable individuality, (general) artistic intentions, and aesthetics. As stated previously, such a display entails individual artworks hung on large, empty white walls, neatly spread out, framed by curatorial/exhibition statements which, though often mention politics, remain very general, i.e. do not provide specific analyses or insights and certainly no intricate arguments. The justification for general statements and smaller labels and texts which provide seemingly neutral information supplementary to the artwork and exhibition is that the artwork, rather than the curator, is placed center stage, where it is considered to belong. In this method, the role of the curator in framing and contextualizing artworks is, firstly, a supportive one; it is the artwork in its own internal logic and direct communication with the viewer that is seen as important. That is, it is assumed that the curatorial display should support the communication of the artwork itself, rather than interfere by imposing an external interpretation whether textually or through visual juxtapositions.

Within professional contexts, the assumption that art should not convey particular meanings in order to allow for the viewer's participation with their own subjectivity is often justified by relying on Jacques Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator*.[26] Rancière upholds the idea that the contemporary artwork and the (contemporary) viewer have become 'equals' since the artwork no longer claims authority over its own meaning. Problematic on multiple levels and oblivious to the workings and politics of the artworld in practice, Rancière's theory also, ironically, resigns the viewer to a casual and uninvested observer. This stance leaves the viewer to look at artwork without seeking to understand it, and instead focus exclusively on one's own feelings and interpretations. It is a re-enforcement of art as a subjective and unparalleled sensorial and subjective experience that cannot be explained and has no particular meanings either in its own claims or as a cultural artefact containing certain ideologies and coming from particular subject positions. By contrast, art can be regarded as *both* a

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sensory experience and, simultaneously and without contradiction, a creation which can potentially hold and convey intentional and supported arguments to be understood and learned and, additionally, an artefact through which cultural values can be read, all at the same time.

P is for Pussy required active participation by offering a specific argument to be understood while simultaneously subjectively sensed, one that stems from the understanding of the artwork as a cultural artefact rather than only a unique and sensorial creation. In other words, as an artistic, curatorial object itself, *P is for Pussy* functioned differently than the Rancièrian model of contemporary art mentioned above. As stated previously, the argument differed in format from research-based contemporary art exhibitions which often lay out books and articles with highlighted passages. Furthermore, it departed from educational exhibitions in historical or cultural museums that provide very direct or scientific-like readings referring to the artworks or artefacts exhibited. *P is for Pussy*'s argument was exhibited through providing the experience of it in the interplay of juxtapositions of artworks combined with texts, rather than having the text function as a descriptive and referential aid to the artwork. The texts were clear and direct in their recounting of the exhibition's dominant narratives and central argument, yet artistic by not necessarily scrutinizing the specific artworks that they were paired with, and instead functioned together with the juxtaposed artworks to facilitate an experience guided towards a particular analysis. The juxtapositions of text and artwork relied on each other and provided sensorial and cognitive engagement which were complementary rather than contradictory. In other words, *P is for Pussy* is an example for a curatorial methodology demonstrating that holding determinate meanings in curating or art does not necessarily mean that the art then becomes 'unartistic' by being flat or easy to understand, nor that it is prescriptive, or that its sensorial, subjective, and 'feeling' aspect has been removed. On the contrary, conveying intricate arguments and meanings often results in a layered and complex display, requiring the viewer's intense concentration as well as one's sensorial and subjective input in order to both understand, feel, and be able to respond with the formulation of one's own interpretation. It can be provocative of powerful responses, producing emotionally charged and cognitively stimulated reactions, which engage with the exhibition by seeking to relate to the argument, for example in order to deny, contradict, extend, or

change it. Such responses may also entail drawing on one's own base of knowledge and personal psychology.

The curatorial approach undertaken within *P is for Pussy* can be interpreted within Griselda Pollock's *Virtual Feminist Museum*,[27] in which she posits how art histories can be re-imagined through a feminist curatorial method going against the 'male hegemony' of the modernist art museum. Her suggested exhibition strategies oppose categorically modernist ideas such as the focus on originality of the artwork; narratives of progress in art history; classification systems of style, nationality, and artistic movements; and the idea of an objective portrayal of history. Instead, Pollock proposes a model in which copies can have higher than or equal relevance to originals; there is no singular truth, and artworks are seen as "cultural processes" which negotiate "meanings shaped by both history and the unconscious."[28] Pollock relates different artworks based on conceptual similarities or contrasts, and at times brings together imaginary encounters as contexts for artworks. *P is for Pussy* can be seen as a type of Virtual Feminist Museum. It departs from it by placing less of an emphasis on multiple interpretive possibilities, and yet, arguably, Pollock's suggested examples for the Virtual Feminist Museum make very particular claims as well.

Other canonical and/or institutionalized feminist and queer (and queer feminist) curating has been complicit with the approach to contemporary art (often justified through Rancièrian art theory) outlined above, but for differing reasons. The greatly contested idea of authorial curating, sometimes referred to as the 'curator as artist/author,' described by curator Elena Filipovic as "heavy-handed" curating which "instrumentalizes the artworks it presents,"[29] is contested within feminist curatorial thought as a "masculinization"[30] of curating. Furthermore, Nanne Buurman has pointed out the gendered scripts implicit in curating, in which the curatorial 'caring' for the artwork, described above, in which the curator's touch invisiblizes itself (and thus, in my view, takes on the pretense of neutrality) corresponds with feminine labors of care which remain exploited, underpaid, and conveniently invisible. By contrast, (mostly male) curators who have either taken on authorial curating or rejected it while centralizing themselves within the canon of curating nonetheless, perpetuated notions of genius and heroism. These are aspects which both feminist curating and feminist art have sought to undo by emphasizing networks,

collaborations, and the politics of love behind artistic production,[31] rather than the work of a singular, creative genius.

Much of feminist and queer curating has also simply refuted authorial curating and the conveying of determinate ideas in curating as representative of oppression. Such was the case, for example, with the 2020 Berlin Biennial, which made an unusual effort to give voice to underrepresented identities and histories, while employing a poetic, curatorial language claiming to "[…] forgo the expectation of a singular concept, a novel idea to once again fix things into place."[32] Indeed determinism has been employed throughout history to benefit existing hierarchies precisely by "fixing things into place" and rendering people's social positions as essential, eternal, and singular. This underlying theoretical basis has served as the justification for the rejection of approaches deemed masculine and white. In particular, it has rejected the model of the 'curator as author' and "singular concept[s]."[33]

In contrast to these approaches, the curatorial strategy in *P is for Pussy* suggests that the role of 'curator as author' and determinate, intricate and particular arguments can be feminist, countering precisely the naturalization of oppression which concepts of indeterminacy and/or multiplicity and ambiguity are often employed to undo. Beyond the question of how to deal with sexist representations within the canonized history of Western art, authorial curating and constructing arguments are particularly useful when dealing with the problematic, social aspects of archives, collections, and histories, without necessarily discarding or censoring them, nor accidentally re-enforcing their very problematics. Exhibitions are always authored works, whether the narration of the curators is made visible or not, and whether or not the artworks are given the space to 'fill in' the content of generally-themed exhibitions. Authorial curating which is based on an analysis of the artworks as a cultural object does impose upon the perceived autonomy of the artwork, and it does so with another narrative it tells about the artwork, outside of what the artwork purportedly tells about itself. Even if this narrative or narratives are intentional and specific, that does not mean that the artwork is completely neutralized or "instrumentalized,"[34] but rather that it has been responded to actively and that this response is being displayed to the viewer, much like a conversation.

This curatorial method is one solution to dealing with collections and archives containing artworks which either represent in themselves or in their content

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oppressions of different kinds. Power has always been implicated in art, which does not discard the ability of art to also be critical of it. This means that art can be both critical of power and simultaneously embedded in it, as well as in infrastructures and histories of art and of knowledge. However, these power structures in which art is implicated and which art can represent can also be rendered visible, as well as opposed, through a curatorial approach which positions itself as authorial. As I suggested above, the curatorial argument/narrative constructed within *P is for Pussy* comes from approaching the artwork as a cultural artefact which is not an irreducible entity but rather can be explained and studied. At the same time, the constructed argument can be methodologically academic and combine artistic approaches, which means that the argument, as in *P is for Pussy*, becomes one possibility of a history. In other words, an argument which is in a certain sense creative, and which nonetheless holds specific and didactic points, could be conveyed both clearly and directly as well as artistically and experientially. There is no prescriptive curatorial methodology to be followed, but rather a conceptual one in which the artwork is approached as both a unique piece on its own, but also as a cultural artefact, and as such the indeterminate and the determinate do not contradict each other and allow for a more complete viewing of art and its power structures as two parts of a whole. Finally, authorial curating is also necessary in order to challenge modes of engaging with art and how art is seen, especially when the artwork should be seen outside of its own established narrative, if we are to deal with history without disowning it.

Rather than prescribing a methodology of how to deal with sexist or otherwise oppressive artworks, the present *_Perspective* has suggested to bring into the curatorial role of framing, supporting, and contextualizing another way of looking at and handling artworks in exhibition settings. This proposed way of viewing interrelates the cognitive with the sensorial in combined academic and artistic strategies in order to enable reading and sensing artwork as connected in various ways to societies and cultural values. This should not be confused with aspects exclusively related to text and image, since each embodies both cognitive and sensorial aspects. Feminist and queer methods which have previously utilized two seemingly opposing strategies of empowerment, that of rendering invisiblized oppression visible and the invisibility implied in indeterminacy as countering fixity,

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are here combined into approaches reliant on each other for effective social critique in art.

The curatorial approach presented here might very well lead to another mode of display, as it has in *P is for Pussy*, and to the formulation of an argument. The stance taken in this *_Perspective* is that modernist modes of display emphasize the disconnection, and seeming opposition, between artistic and cultural developments and constitute a methodology of oppression, as argued in the exhibition. This implied opposition between artistic and cultural developments within modernist modes of display is particularly problematic when pertaining to the display of collections and archives, since they inevitably contain and themselves embody complex and often oppressive social histories. It is, however, also acknowledged here that the curatorial caring for artwork which has long placed it at the center of exhibitions and rendered curatorial labor invisible and seemingly neutral, corresponds to often de-valued feminine gender scripts and to a broader approach taken within queer feminist theories arguing against fixity and determinism of meanings and identities. Such principles, however, cannot be dogmatically applied but must instead consider the specificities of each case study and the workings of the practical art field, which has also taken advantage of these ideas.[35] The requirement of art's incompleteness and its lack of demands from the viewer, who is purportedly then free or active, is itself deterministic and essentialist in the absoluteness of its principles and the claiming of such principles as the only feminist option. *P is for Pussy* challenged the notion that the determinate and indeterminate embodied in understanding and feeling, in the artwork as a cultural artefact and as a catalyst for subjectivity, are opposites at all. Rather, *P is for Pussy* can be seen to open up another space for feminist curating, in which the artistry and authorship of the curator function to narrate, illuminate, and counteract the problematics of collections made up of social and art histories to be reckoned with.

_Endnotes

1 *P is for Pussy* is meant to be a humorous exhibition title which my mother had come up with.

2 The term 'sexist' is defined within *P is for Pussy* which brought to the viewer the oppressive social history in which artworks from the 19th century were created and the conditions in which the modernist turn took place, as well as analyses of specific tropes and their usage.

3 For example, sexist, racist, antisemitic, etc.

[4] By using the phrase 'cultural values' the intention here is that artworks are not made solely with intentional meanings but are rather composed and shaped by underlying, often unintentional, ideologies and values of creators who are inevitably subject to particular social positions, and exposed to certain historical, political, and cultural processes.

[5] Taya Hanauer, "From an Ethical to an Aesthetic Critique: Modernism as an Artistic Method of Re-Subordination as Seen through Manet's 'Olympia'," in *P is for Pussy* (Baltimore: Press Press, 2017), 44–61.

[6] I would argue this tradition is not confined to art in the global north. See: Taya Hanauer, "Aesthetics over Content: The Ideology of the Male Ego," *Erev Rav* (2016), <https://www.erev-rav.com/archives/43424>.

[7] These thematic categories of the cat as symbolic of femininity are not exhaustive. One category that I unfortunately could not accommodate in the exhibition was the category of the housewife.

[8] I began working on the exhibition a couple of years after having finished my Master's in Cultural Analysis at the University of Amsterdam (with a background in Art History), and while being both critical of the contemporary artworld in the Netherlands and simultaneously upset with the difficulties of accessing it, especially as a foreigner. *P is for Pussy* took almost two years to create, and was an incredible amount of work done with my own, limited funding, out of the sheer desire to create it, and without the type of supportive structures available in paid residencies or museum exhibitions. This should be taken into due consideration, since it posed its own restrictions, advantages, and my own, personal will power.

[9] Kant's aesthetic theory emphasized that the judgement of art should be derived from a universal and objective ("disinterested") pleasure responsive to artistic forms, detached from one's subjective or personally involved ("interested") responses to recognizable concepts implicated by the artworks.

[10] Academic painting was a particular style of painting practiced in European art academics focused on teaching technique and idealized depiction.

[11] In the form of women's rights movements

[12] As argued by Lorraine O'Grady and others, *Olympia* was not only a challenging or empowered representation of a white woman's personhood, but also a racist representation in which the white and black are positioned as binary, moral opposites. Lorraine O'Grady, "Olympia's Made: Reclaiming Black, Female Subjectivity," in *Art, Activism and Oppositionality: Essays from Afterimage*, ed. Grant Kester (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 268–286.

[13] Of course, it should be noted that this turn from an ethical (which does not mean justified) to an aesthetic artistic practice and critique is not discussed in this language or with this emphasis in the canonized history of Western art, but rather in terms of art's autonomy, its liberation from idealism, artistic homogeneity of Academism and the constricting of individuality and the subjectivity of the artist, and not surprisingly, with no emphasis on social categories such as gender. As such, a changed mode of evaluation which is employed and being effectuated especially by art professionals and experts and remains implicit rather than emphasized, particularly regarding representation.

[14] I am referring to an evaluation of art present in Academic artworks of the Paris salon circle, drawing its inspiration from Plato, and based on the idea that art's representations hold the potential for social influence (either good or bad). My use of the term 'ethical critique' of art should not be confused with it being a necessarily morally justified one, but rather one based on moral values, whatever those may be.

15 For a discussion on Picasso's *Demoiselles* see: Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Routledge, 1992), 245–256. See also: Anna Chave, "New Encounters with Les Demoiselles D'Avignon: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 301–324.

16 *The Bookstore* is a unique initiative in Amsterdam of artist Johanna de Schipper, which allowed for a diverse range of art practitioners to live affordably in temporary, anti-squat housing while working for different community facilities. It was also unique in its selection process, which, in my view, was unprecedented in the Dutch art scene by not relying solely on the reputation economy, enabling people like me to make creative work which would otherwise not find its place.

17 It should be noted that this type of framing of a collection can be instrumentalized in two ways: as a validation of the collection through its entrenchment in a canonized, Western art history and, as I attempted in this exhibition, as a demonstration of the shared, underlying assumptions, ideologies, values, and visualizations about gender, to name one example. The two, in my opinion, are not opposite but rather implicated in each other, since sexist values constitute the canonized, Western art history.

18 See: T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). See also: Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," *Arts Yearbook* 4, no. 1 (1961): 101–8.

19 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Originally published as articles for *Artforum* in 1976.

20 Corneille is the pseudonym used by Dutch artist Guillaume Cornelis van Beverloo.

21 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin Books, 1972).

22 Academic painting was a particular style of painting practiced by European art academics focused on teaching technique and idealized depiction.

23 Taya Hanauer, wall text in exhibition section "Rape" in *P is for Pussy*.

24 Taya Hanauer, wall text in exhibition section "Rape" in *P is for Pussy*.

25 An additional section which cannot be more extensively discussed here is the "Old Woman (Cat Lady)" category. This category addressed the stereotype attributed to women who are in fact deemed rebellious by, for instance, not getting married or having children, and have in the eyes of patriarchy timed out of their ultimate roles providing visual pleasure for the male gaze. This section shows artworks of women, at times with cats, looking into mirrors, and is combined with two texts, one about the cultural stereotype of Cat Lady and the other about the male gaze.

26 Jacques Ranciere, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso Books, 2011).

27 Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Feminist Virtual Museum: Time, Space, and the Archive* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

28 Pollock, *Encounters in the Feminist Virtual Museum: Time, Space, and the Archive*, 10.

29 Elena Filipovic, "What is an Exhibition?," in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffmann (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 73–81, here: 77.

30 Nanne Buurman, "Engendering Exhibitions: The Politics of Gender in Negotiating Curatorial Authorship," *Journal of Curatorial Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 115–136, here: 116. Angela Dimitrakaki, *Gender, Artwork, and the Global Imperative: A Materialist, Feminist Critique*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Dorothee Richter, "Artists and Curators as Authors: Competitors, Collaborators, or Teamworkers?," in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismack, Jörn Shaffaf and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

31 Krasny, Elke, "Curatorial Materialism: A Feminist Perspective on Independent and Co-Dependent Curating," *OnCurating* 29 (2016): 96–107,
<https://www.on-curating.org/issue-29-reader/curatorial-materialism-a-feminist-perspective-on-independent-and-co-dependent-curating.html#.Ynlnu4xBw2w>.

32 Maria Berríos, Renata Cervetto, Lisette Lagnado, and Agustín Pérez Rubio, "The Crack Begins Within," in *The Crack Begins Within: Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art* (Berlin: 11th Berlin Biennial for Contemporary Art, 2020), 22–26, here: 22.

33 Berríos, Cervetto, Lagnado, and Pérez Rubio, "The Crack Begins Within," 22.

34 Filipovic, "What is an Exhibition?," 77.

35 Nanne Buurman, "From Prison Guard to Healer: Curatorial Subjectivities in the Context of Gendered Economies," *OnCurating: Instituting Feminism* 52 (2021): 21–34, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-52-reader/from-prison-guard-to-healer-curatorial-authorships-in-the-context-of-gendered-economie.html#.ZEol1y-230o>.