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**“And the One Doesn’t Stir...”:**  
**On curatorial practice and the making of feminist histories**  
Marsha Meskimmon

This essay charts a journey through a series of concentric circles. Like a pebble dropped into a still pool, the exhibition *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other* acted as a point of impact around which resonances between feminist art, activism, history and theory were amplified. It is not surprising that my journey takes the form of undulating waves rather than linear recounting, nor that its aftershocks connect differences rather than destroy them. One of the most significant legacies of feminism to epistemology has been the dismantling of the disembodied logic which underpins monolithic modes of historical narrative. The show's curatorial sensitivity to the nuances of materiality, time and space enabled visitors to participate with the works in reconceiving the histories of feminist art/theory.

My first circle of encounter was the show in its space - the Ormeau Baths Gallery, Belfast. The guest curators, Ruth Jones and Ursula Burke, worked closely with the curatorial and technical staff of the OBG to realise the final exhibition and, to put it crudely, this attention to detail was immediately apparent. There was no reductive chronology forced upon the work, nor was the space simplistically organised around categories of medium, subject-matter or scale. I make this point not only to congratulate the curators on their efforts, but to stress that the same shortlist of works might well have produced a much more conventional and less engaging exhibition, if handled otherwise.

For example, an easier solution to the hang might have placed the photographs of Claude Cahun/ Marcel Moore in the first space of the show, followed by the works of Ana Mendieta, Hannah Wilke and Helen Chadwick, toward the pieces by Lucy Gunning, Jananne Al-Ani and Sandra Johnston as the 'inheritors' of feminist art praxis. Such chronological treatments exist in the literature and 'make sense' of the complexities of these artists' uses of materials, choices of subject and reliance (or not) on high theory by arguing a unified and progressive history. In this account, early feminist interventions were blunt and essentialist, then came under the spell of poststructuralism to become inaccessible comments on the obscurity of the sign... or some such reductive and unhelpful reading which ignores the evidence of the work itself and the primary critical literature.[1]

As a counterpoint, *And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other* elaborated its Irigarayan title in the sensory spaces of the show, inviting alternative histories to emerge through vital connections across generations and presumed positions. Anecdotally, the success

of this strategy was demonstrated when participants in the panel discussion spoke of their own encounters with the works in ways which were as varied as their voices. Indeed, what stood out for me in listening to others describe their experiences of the work as configured in *And the One* was that each speaker had played an active role in making connections across the rooms and the pieces shown; the curatorial work had not enforced a singular reading, but rather permitted visitors to exercise their agency as historical subjects.

For my part, this first circle of encounter might be described in terms of 'bliss'[2], where the legibility of the text breaks apart and you are able to see as if for the first time. These moments of bliss frequently occur in the tiniest of details: first-hand sight of the touches of decay that now inscribe the flesh of Wilke's beautiful *Rosebud* (1975); subdued light picking out the velvet finish of Mendieta's photographic prints; the scent of chocolate from Chadwick's *Cacao* (1994) lingering as I examined the lines on the wall and floor drawn by Johnston, in another space, to test the limits of her body's reach. The physicality and sensuality evoked by the hang of the show made works that were familiar to me *new*.

While I want to convey the pleasure of seeing the works as they were offered to us in *And the One*, I do not want to give the impression that their sensual force rendered visitors mute through perceptual exhaustion or that the show's impact was to demonstrate pure, aesthetic autonomy in art. By complete contrast, the sensory impact of the show enhanced the intellectual resonance of the work and led outward toward another circle of potential encounters. I see these encounters as *passages*, as journeys from one space to another, movements across time and moments of meaning articulated, as in passages of text or image.

For instance, leaving the first light spaces of *And the One*, visitors entered a small pair of darkened rooms where the work of Cahun/Moore and Al-Ani were shown. The diminutive photographs of Cahun, taken by her lover during the inter-war years, necessitated a close and intimate mode of looking. As you were drawn in, the repetitive strategies of the works emerged - here and there the same mirror, piece of clothing or pose reminded you of the fictions of identity and masquerade. The absent-but-loved photographer appeared once too, in an image of Moore, posed in the mirror, taken by Cahun. Many will not have noticed that this was not again Cahun and, in a sense, that was the point.

Al-Ani's video installation, produced over half a century later, followed the works of Cahun and Moore in the physical space of the exhibition. On paper, this might seem an awkward conjunction, driven only by the necessity to find a darkened space in the

gallery. In practice, it made possible a series of cross-generational, cross-cultural dialogues to take place. Al-Ani's installation, *A Loving Man* (1996), appeared as a set of talking heads on televisions, each showing a woman narrating the story of an absent man, the loving father/husband who connects them. As we watched, his absence became less significant in the wake of their definitive presence; their voices resonated in the space, their difference-in-repetition reversing the structural logic of patriarchy by articulating *female* subjectivity through the sacrifice of the *male* body.

The works of Cahun/Moore and Al-Ani were neither staged as equivalents, nor forced into homogeneous unity, by their mutual positioning in small, darkened spaces. Instead, their differences entered into a dialogue across the two rooms in *And the One*, rendering visible the complex histories of women seeking and finding empowered subject positions through art. The play of presence and absence, visual distance and proximity, repetition and difference that linked the works, simultaneously emphasised the nuances of their materiality and that fact refused any totalising readings of 'woman'. Both works are passages in time and space, each articulates the question of female subjectivity and creative agency, but their definitive configuration of sexual difference in and through specific historical parameters renders any attempt to essentialise 'woman' or the 'feminine' futile. In the passage between these works, we encounter a feminist historiography which is neither monolithic nor simply oppositional; while the one does not stir without the other, neither can difference be reduced to an economy of the same.

The final circle of my own encounter with *And the One* might be understood as an extension of the multi-sensory experience of the show and a burgeoning sense of the impact this might have on feminist curatorial practices in the future. Again, a relationship between the works in the space was the pivot around which these ideas formed, specifically, the juxtaposition of Gunning's video *The Horse Impressionists* (1994) with Chadwick's *Cacao* and *Wreaths of Pleasure* from the same period. It is a commonplace in the literature to note the near-sickening intensity of the scent of chocolate in Chadwick's 'fountain' and to describe the repulsion-in-attraction materialised through the haptic qualities of the *Wreaths*. What I did not anticipate, however, was the aural landscape that was formed in the room as the thick chocolate rumbled and spat like molten lava against the shrill, piercing sounds of the women's voices-becoming-horses. The sound mapped the space, intensifying and receding in double resonance; waves of sound emanated from each piece, playing together, and then were amplified and distorted by the movement of listeners as they circumnavigated the room.

Desire, memory, pleasure, abjection and the inscription of knowledge in and through the senses marked the space and revisited the conventional feminist rejection of the disembodied eye. Not only were our bodies implicated by the proximity of touch and the

possibility of ingestion, we were *called*, and by extension, *called forth*, by this space. Interpellated through this play of the senses, the meaning of Gunning's video and Chadwick's fountain were not simply historical, but truly contemporary, formed by their joint presence in the moment of the show. The sensorial connections made between them through the curatorial strategies of *And the One* opened them to the future, not by rejecting their histories, but revitalising them. For me, this demonstrated yet again that, far from being the relic of an activist past, feminist interventions, in art, theory, politics and culture, continue to remake the world.

#### NOTES

1. See Whitney Chadwick's essay in this volume which demonstrates clearly that the projects of feminists in the 1930s and 1970s were never simplistic or essentialist.
2. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, translated by Richard Miller, NY: Hill and Wang, 1975.