

**A FEMINIST AVANT-GARDE:
Photographs and performances from the 1970s
from the VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna**

Every summer, *Les Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles*, the renowned photography festival, stages around forty exhibitions in the city of Arles. This year, the main exhibition in this festival is “*A Feminist Avant-Garde: Photographs and Performances from the 1970s*,” featuring more than two hundred works by seventy-one female artists. The works are drawn from the VERBUND COLLECTION in Vienna. Over the last twelve years, the Collection’s touring exhibition “The Feminist Avant-Garde” has been shown at locations all over Europe. This will be its first staging in France.

Mécanique Générale, Parc des Ateliers, 35 avenue Victor Hugo

July 4 – September 25, 2022

10 a.m. – 7.30 p.m.

<https://www.rencontres-arles.com/en/expositions/view/1045/a-feminist-avant-garde>

Actionist, provocative and poetic

“The exhibition makes clear that the works are drawn from many different feminisms: the works are both provocative – at times even actionist – and poetic. Their poetic qualities were too ‘quiet to be noticed during the 1970s. Today we can also appreciate the poetic quality of feminist art,” says **Gabriele Schor**, curator and founding director of the VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna.

VERBUND has had an art collection for the last eighteen years. Why is that?

VERBUND strives for social responsibility and supports a range of social, cultural and sporting projects. Within the field of art, it was decided that the “cultural work” should be carried out within the company itself. “For VERBUND, this commitment to contemporary art forms part of our corporate culture,” says **Michael Strugl**, VERBUND’s CEO. “What the VERBUND COLLECTION seeks to do is discover artists who were previously unknown. We raise their visibility in order to leave a trace within our cultural memory.”

Why the title “Feminist Avant-Garde”?

Exhibitions of work from the feminist art movement often have titles like “the feminist revolution” or “radical women.” **Gabriele Schor** coined the term “feminist avant-garde” because of the art-historical significance of the term “avant-garde.” She explains: “For the first time in the history of art, these women artists created an entirely new ‘image of woman,’ from a female perspective. Their pioneering achievement deserves a place within the canon of art history, ensured by the term “avant-garde.”

New media: photography, film and video

The new media of photography, film, and video were particularly useful for female artists, allowing them to break away from painting, with its male-dominated traditions. Above all, photography was a historically unencumbered medium which allowed women to work without a studio, spontaneously and without spatial constraints. The self-timer was always there if needed. The bathroom was often converted into a darkroom. The technical aspects of photography were not so much a concern for the artists of the feminist avant-garde, whose works tended to be based more on a concern for storytelling and a desire to trace narrative strands. For this reason, the exhibition is predominantly made up of series of smaller black-and-white photographs. Photography was still not widely recognized as an art medium in this period, because it allowed the same image to be reproduced multiple times, a problematic aspect for those clinging to ideas of the “unique artwork” traditionally associated with painting.

The private is political

At this time, Western countries saw the emergence of the second wave of the women’s movement, against a backdrop of the 1968 student movement, the “sexual revolution,” and efforts to overcome the traditional moral values of the wartime generation. Women came to see that their problems were not “personal” but instead arose from established social structures of power and dominance. Women in Western countries rebelled against legal discrimination which meant that a man, as head of a family, could single-handedly make far-reaching decisions affecting women and children. Women called for “private” issues to be discussed in public, including family law, marriage, unpaid reproductive labor, pregnancy, abortion, divorce, and violence against women.

The exhibition is composed of five sections

1. The revolt against being seen solely as "mothers, wives, and housewives."

Birgit Jürgenssen hangs a stove from her body and places a loaf of bread in the oven, in a nod to phrases like “to have a bun in the oven,” i.e. to be pregnant.

2. A feeling of being “locked-in” and wanting to break out of this one-dimensional role. Sonia Andrade wraps her face tightly with thread. Annegret Soltau and Renate Eisenegger also wrap their faces so tightly they can neither see nor speak. Soltau cuts the thread with scissors, suggesting the possibility of liberation from the patriarchy, but Eisenegger remains motionless. It is striking how the Brazilian artist and the two German artists independently created such similar works.

3. Rebelling against the "dictates of beauty"; “making use of the female body.”

Katalin Ladik and Ana Mendieta – neither artist knowing the other’s work – both squash their faces against glass, contorting their noses and lips, thus subverting the idea that women should be nice and neat. Very often the work of female artists

makes use of their own bodies. With these depictions of the female body, women artists occupy terrain which for centuries had been the preserve of male artists.

4. Exploring female sexuality. In a photo-collage entitled *ICU, Eye Sea You, I See You*, Penny Slinger puts her body in a wedding cake, legs spread, the image of an eye placed over her vulva. In doing so, she rejects the reduction of women to the status of objects. She highlights how women can actively acknowledge their sexuality, seeking to be perceived as sexual subjects in their own right. Here too, we can see surprising parallels between two unconnected female artists: in an entirely separate work, Annegret Soltau also places an eye over her vulva.

5. Role-playing and identity. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir had declared that “*One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one.*” In other words, social conditions are what give rise to the construction of femininity. Many female artists used role play to explore what it meant to be a woman in the 1970s. These artists disguised themselves with make-up, wigs, and facial expressions, using these tactics to debunk clichés and stereotypes. Examples of this approach include the work of the American artists Martha Wilson, Suzy Lake, Lynn Hersman Leeson, and Cindy Sherman. It is fascinating to see how Marcella Campagnano, a less well-known Italian artist, created very similar productions at the same time.

In the 1970s, female artists of color in particular were subject to multiple forms of discrimination, including racism, class, and gender discrimination. Their works clearly address questions of intersectionality, even before the term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. This is impressively demonstrated by the Afro-Peruvian activist and choreographer Victoria Santa Cruz, who shares her personal experience of discrimination in the video performance *Victoria: Black and Woman* (1978). Howardena Pindell and Emma Amos take similar positions. In her photo performance *Mlle Bourgeoise Noire*, Lorraine O'Grady attacks her own Black community, suggesting they should independently produce their own art, rather than following the artistic guidelines of white curators. The singular “avant-garde” in the exhibition’s title refers to a multitude of feminist movements, varied in terms of nationality, culture and generation.

Seventy-one women artists

Helena Almeida, 1934–2018 PT | Emma Amos, 1938–2020 USA | Sonja Andrade, 1935 BRA | Eleanor Antin, 1935 USA | Anneke Barger, 1939 NL | Lynda Benglis, 1941 USA | Renate Bertlmann, 1943 AT | Tomaso Binga, 1931 IT | Dara Birnbaum, 1946 USA | Marcella Campagnano, 1941 IT | Elizabeth Catlett, 1915–2012 USA | Judy Chicago, 1939 USA | Veronika Dreier, 1954 AT | Orshi Drozdik, 1946 HU/USA | Lili Dujourie, 1941 BE | Mary Beth Edelson, 1933 USA | Renate Eisenegger, 1949 DE/CH | VALIE EXPORT, 1940 AT | Esther Ferrer, 1937 ES | Marisa González, 1945 ES | Eulàlia Grau, 1946 ES | Barbara Hammer, 1939–2019 USA | Lynn Hersman Leeson, 1941 USA | Alexis Hunter, 1948–2014 NZ/UK | Mako Idemitsu, 1940 JP/USA | Birgit Jürgenssen, 1949–2003 AT | Kirsten Justesen, 1943 DNK | Anna Kutera, 1952 PL | Ketty La Rocca, 1938–1976 IT | Leslie Labowitz, 1946 USA |

Suzanne Lacy, 1945 USA | Katalin Ladik, 1942 SRB/HU | Suzy Lake, 1947 USA|CAN | Natalia LL, 1937 PL | Lea Lublin, 1929–1999 PL/FR | Karin Mack, 1940 AT | Dindga McCannon, 1947 USA | Ana Mendieta, 1948–1985 CU/USA | Annette Messenger, 1943 FR | Rita Myers, 1947 USA | Senga Nengudi, 1943 USA | Lorraine O’Grady, 1934 USA | ORLAN, 1947 FR | Gina Pane, 1939–1990 FR | Leticia Parente, 1930–1991 BRA | Ewa Partum, 1945 PL/DE | Friederike Pezold, 1945 AT | Margot Pilz, 1936 NL/AT | Howardena Pindell, 1943 USA | Ingeborg G. Pluhar, 1944 AT | Angels Ribé, 1943 ES | Ulrike Rosenbach, 1943 DE | Martha Rosler, 1943 USA | Brigitte Aloise Roth, 1951–2018 AT | Victoria Santa Cruz, 1922–2014 PER | Suzanne Santoro, 1946 USA/IT | Carolee Schneemann, 1939–2019 USA | Lydia Schouten, 1955 NL | Elaine Shemilt, 1954 USA | Cindy Sherman, 1954 USA | Penny Slinger, 1954 UK | Annegret Soltau, 1946 DE | Gabriele Stötzer, 1953 GDR/DE | Betty Tompkins, 1945 USA | Regina Vater, 1943 BRA | Marianne Wex, 1937–2020 DE | Hannah Wilke, 1940–1993 USA | Martha Wilson, 1947 USA | Francesca Woodman, 1958–1981 USA | Nil Yalter, 1938 EG/FR | Jana Želibská, 1941 SLOV

Newly published publication accompanying the exhibition

UNE AVANT-GARDE FÉMINISTE

Photographies et performances des années 1970 de la Collection Verbund

Gabriele Schor

Published by delpire & co

496 pages / French

ISBN 9791095821489

EUR 62,00

<https://delpireandco.com/produit/une-avant-garde-feministe/>

Dropbox link

to press photos and artist lists

<https://www.dropbox.com/sh/vw5fxaf8s3yai48/AACU6cYVJJ3lRxsTGLx0HnRRa?dl=0>

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VERBUND COLLECTION, Vienna

The VERBUND COLLECTION was founded in 2004 in Vienna by the board of the Austrian energy group VERBUND. The collection’s holdings now include more than 873 works of art by 172 artists.