A feminist critique of capitalism

Citation for published version:

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):
10.1093/oxartj/kcac022

Link:
Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Published In:
Oxford Art Journal

General rights
Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy
The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
A Feminist Critique of Capitalism: Class, Gender, Work and Unrest in Women’s Art after 2008

I. Introduction: The feminist art revolution, forty years later (or after the global financial crisis)

In 2010, two years into the global financial crisis that exacerbated the already substantial socio-economic divides of global capitalism, artist and activist Lynn Hershman Leeson released !Women Art Revolution (!WAR), a documentary that is militant in its convictions as much as affirmative of how ‘the Feminist Art Movement fused free speech and politics into an art that radically transformed the art and culture of our times’.¹ Hershman Leeson collected material for decades, including about forty interviews with artists, curators and critics engaged in feminist critique in, and since, the 1960s and 1970s. A commitment to intersectionality informs this social document as a review of the ‘new ways of thinking’ that developed ‘about the complexities of gender, race, class, and sexuality’ in the American feminist art movement.² That is, Hershman Leeson created a positional and reflective audio-visual record from which the question of class is not absent, but is instead woven into the expansive concept of politics that the feminist movement in art, and more broadly, set as one of its primary goals. ‘What we found was a whole different way to talk about work, and I discovered very quickly it wasn’t the ways the boys talked about work’, says artist Harmony Hammond in her interview of 2008.

‘Work’ is not the only reference in !WAR that is also prominent in Marxist critiques of culture. There is also ‘alienation’, brought up by Hershman Leeson herself in discussing the political impetus of inventing an alter ego (the fictional character Roberta Breitmore that she impersonated for years and documented as The Roberta Breitmore Series, 1978-79).³ Yet the most telling confession with regard to class comes from feminist graphic designer and educator Sheila Levrant de Bretteville. Interviewed in 2008, de Bretteville says - and says it in tears: ‘It just hurts not having money, when you want things so badly. It makes me identify with those who don’t have money, the sense of limitation that economics makes, it’s so powerful’. And she adds: ‘In a way, I think we used it wrong then, we saw that as, oh, the dominant culture is not letting us have, and we didn’t identify with the people who had not, and this made it so peculiar to be lacking in funds’. In an earlier interview of De Bretteville, conducted in 1990 and also included in !WAR, she had sounded much more confident as

she talked about ‘glitzes’ that had to be solved by the feminists taking on the art world (confirming on camera: ‘and we did’).

In the advanced economies of the West, capitalism had indeed changed tremendously between 1990, when the Cold War of the 20th century was concluding with capital’s victory, and 2008, when global neoliberalism had made even the nation-states where ‘capitalism used to work’ look at themselves questioningly. Feminists, liberal or on the left, could not remain unaffected, in the art field as much as elsewhere. But the revolutionary project of changing art, which Hershman Leeson’s documentary represents and reflects on, was to remain incomplete. More than incomplete, in 2010, as the consequences of the global financial crisis were spiralling transnationally and ‘precarity’ was becoming an art-field buzzword, the project of transforming gender relations in an art system organised by capital was being recast as politically naïve in its expectations - for the reality of what capitalism was actually able to have under its control was becoming, for many, inescapable. What I want to suggest here is that the political optimism of second-wave feminism in the arts was but a memory by 2010 - indeed, a memory that had to be excavated through a documentary such as Hershman Leeson’s, given how long this memory had been suppressed in a public sphere defined by hierarchies and exclusions - even in the latter’s iteration as art.

The above hardly means that feminism was absent from art around 2010 - after, that is, the shock of 2008 - but that it was by then anchored to an investigative mentality that jarred both with the confident militancy and the hopefulness of the context described in IWAR. Questions of class were indeed diffused in art making that engaged the critique of gender relations at the time of the global financial crisis - and I place ‘diffused’ in italics to also suggest that class had not been exactly prominent. But neither was class marginalised in the post-2008 setting, as in some earlier moments of feminism in the field - moments in which ‘gender’ appeared as the singular privileged term in the feminist analysis of art to the extent that the critique of capitalism was significantly underplayed. As regards the feminist art movement of the 1970s, in hindsight it does not appear to have been in alignment with ‘the struggle’ as defined in the Combahee River Collective Statement of 1977, in which we find an articulation of intersectionality from below, with class and racial justice perspectives being its defining features. At the same time, it cannot be said that the feminist art movement wished collectively merely for participation and inclusion in the capitalist art structure, although this was certainly a notable tendency. Arguably, it became the winning tendency, and today we’d be hard pressed to piece together a history of mass feminist opposition to the capitalist institutional framework or refer to a fully developed feminist theory against the relations of production that capital

---

organises in art. The four artworks that provide the focus of analysis below, all made in 2010 by women artists engaged with feminist critique, visualise concerns about how capital intersects with gender. They are also notable for addressing the imbrication of the capitalist relations of production and reproduction. A concern of the present analysis is that, to the extent that an earlier feminism gradually shifted to reformist politics, this shift is not unrelated to the socio-economic relations addressed in these four works, and also to how these relations are addressed. That is, the way class is visualised through the lens of post-2008 women’s work that converses with feminism is not unrelated to the gradual dilution of a past feminist revolution in art and beyond. I will return to these thoughts in the final section of this article.

II. Intersections of class and gender through the lens of feminist critique

(a) Women and the making of a class society

The first work I want to turn to is the most straightforward among the four in terms of how it visualises class in relation to women’s lives. Marge Monko’s *Shaken Not Stirred* is a 20-minute-long fiction, single-channel film that follows two middle-aged women in post-Soviet Estonia, a Russian cleaner and an Estonian businesswoman. To quote from the artist’s website, ‘the aim of the film is to reflect upon the experiences of a post-soviet condition, the conversion to market economy in the beginning of the 1990s as well as the changes in labour politics during the last 20 years’. The film does exactly that, its stark realism hardly challenged by the women’s monologues as a ‘murmuring’ that verges, content-wise, on a mental crisis and, form-wise, on a recuperation of Brechtian narrative disruption. For, even if the characters never exit their scripted roles, airing a self-analysis of their condition startles and shames the viewer who, whether he (sic) likes it or not, is confronted with a stream of (political) consciousness that contemporary sociality typically condemns to the unutterable outside the therapist’s office.

It is disturbing to witness the making of class society through ‘believable’ subjectivities, and the explicit gendering of the characters’ problems makes this a work of post-socialist realism (if I am permitted the pun). The ‘gendering’ speaks through a lens that is committed to delivering an always

---


already classed femininity. Femininity is embodied, but in a society where ‘clothes make the woman’: specifically, the businesswoman’s shiny two-piece and the female cleaner’s matt uniform. (Figs 1 and 2.) Predictably, the businesswoman’s sexy yet austere hairdo, her lipstick and smooth, unwrinkled complexion, her slim figure (despite childbirth), contrast with the uncovered wrinkles of the ‘cleaning lady’, her unkemptness, her heavy physique and the implied state of ‘letting go of herself’. That the businesswoman’s monologues take place in a spacious veranda from which she overlooks the city while the cleaner’s monologues take place in the back room of the bar-restaurant where the businesswoman is a patron is in itself the frame where class privilege and class oppression are lived out.

And yet, complaining ultimately belongs to both women. Both women complain about having to work hard. The well-off managing director of a company (and board member of three more) makes use of the I-worked-hard-to-be-where-I-am Thatcherite outlook, - ‘In 1991, when Estonia got to be independent, we were all starting behind the same starting line’. Even if she made it, she still had to be humiliated with her husband’s chasing after young women, not to mention that she had to upgrade by doing a Masters, years back, while studying at night after having completed her social reproduction labour. Her class privilege is ‘demonstrated’ through her license to talk openly about a recurring but allegorical bad dream she has. The cleaner, on the other hand, is not concerned with dream analysis, and, we guess, that she never had access to a psychoanalyst. The cleaner just states reality. She wonders: ‘who does the washing of the dishes interest?’ In the cleaner’s life, everything needs to be done because it needs to be done. Being Russian placed her de facto as a looser in the post-Soviet state. ‘People speak of the newly rich’, she says, ‘but there were also the newly-poor. Of course, nobody writes about us’. And no one flirts with them either, apparently. Although the restaurant’s barman is acquainted with both women, he reserves his idealised femininity quotes for the businesswoman, one worth discussing ‘life and love’, and a bit of Freud, with. The Russian cleaner, a widow, has only one dream. It does not disturb her sleep, for the dream is her conscious desire when she is awake: she desires a little house in the country where she’d be left alone, saved from work, and saved also from the demand to be politicised. When the two women meet, that’s in the restaurant bathroom: the businesswoman, fixing her make up, is told off by the Russian cleaner: her class is serving the businesswoman’s class, cleaning after them for peanuts. The businesswoman attempts charity rather than solidarity, and when the cleaner gets offended, the businesswoman leaves the women’s toilets angry. The film ends.

The film ends realistically on at least three accounts: (a) any common politics among the two women are precluded because of their class antagonism; (b) the working-class woman operates on the realm of necessity but rather that this making her see the necessity for a revolution, she craves a
personal exit; (c) only the middle-class woman is driven by her individual status to ruminate about gender inequality within her class. Despite being about a post-Soviet context, the film betrays the wider social truth that sustains capital’s hegemony even in the bleak 2010: the impossibility of realising ‘the personal is political’ when individualism is the era’s dominant ideology.

(b) Women in the global working class (and in the capitalist art market)

Mika Rottenberg’s Squeeze is also organised as a fiction film (that is, video), albeit not of the realist tradition. Included in an installation that serves as a metaphor for the difficulty of accessing the reality of industrial labour, this is a single-channel, 20-minute long moving-image work performed by actresses - despite the inclusion of footage, towards its end, from the agricultural industry. The video is constructed as a surrealist parody of the absurdity of capitalist extraction that itself constructs a global, yet dispersed, working class. Rottenberg’s interest is in the position that women’s bodies occupy in this chain of value transfer, and as regards the inevitable deployment of the non-white, racialised body, she says that she focused on ‘friction’:

[...] in Squeeze you have that racial friction that for me was the fuel, the energy, behind the whole machine. [...] I didn’t know if I could get away with having Asian women with naked white butts behind them and a black woman meditating. I didn’t know how that would read. I didn’t want a caricature but a real friction that would be more dynamic because you’re not sure who’s in power and who’s not.8

And yet, there is no question about who is in power as regards the construction of an actually existing global working class, given that the outcome of the Cold War saw capital move across the globe in search of cheap, feminised (and often female) labour. Rottenberg’s deliberate ambiguity as regards the owner of power seems to stem more from her feminist make-up - both in terms of the attachment of second-wave feminist epistemologies to the (presumed) instability of meaning and in terms of the feminist refusal to see women, especially working women, as victims. The representation of working-class women in particular as non-victims, and the consequent pull towards a feminist visual culture of empowerment, have been staples of feminist interventions in art and elsewhere. I will not comment here on the efficacy of these choices on the part of feminism as politics in the patriarchal-capitalist arena. Rather, I am making this point to suggest that the visualisation of

a gendered class in *Squeeze* has a history, even if the work is resolutely focused on the processes of fragmentation that capital has mastered as the *sine qua non* of global production.

In *Squeeze* questions of reproduction - indeed, the reproduction of the female agricultural industry worker - are centre stage and constitute the narrative’s most absurd moments. Various body parts are being replenished. Women working in fields extend their arms into holes in the soil so that they are met with, and washed and pampered by, other workers’ hands. The field workers’ hands are rubbed, cleaned, relaxed. These are the glory holes of care labour as an assembly line, or the imaginary global manicure salon. The two groups of workers never meet. How could they and why should they, anyway? Both the work in the fields, in one part of the world, and care labour, in another part of the world are components of the process of production - both groups know this, as does everyone else in *Squeeze*. As for empowerment, it is only subtly present. Very subtly. It can hardly be encountered as any more than a projection by the more privileged feminist spectator rather than the bodies that endure their seemingly inescapable life-as-production chain. *Squeeze* is devoid of any prospect of revolt. And like in all of Rottenberg’s moving-image works, the consumption of female bodies in production becomes here eerily literal: bodily matter drips or is thrown into the mix that will make the ‘commodity’ - usually an indecipherable ‘object’ the use-value of which is at best obscure but the exchange-value of which is signified by its enclosure into something that we know as ‘artwork’.

In this class narrative, everything needs to be condensed and at the same time exaggerated. The camera angles on women’s body parts as they work in alignment. *(Figs 3 and 4)* A generic factory comes to mind - and Rottenberg has said that she ‘began the work by visiting a rubber plant in India and an iceberg lettuce farm in Arizona’.9 It is fair to say that the product, the output of the women’s coordinated labour, is not what matters here. What matters is that the spectacularisation of women’s bodies meets the spectacularisation of Marx’s ‘hidden abode of production’, and that art is the facilitator of this made-into-spectacle. This is not Fredric Jameson’s ‘surrealism without the unconscious’, as he famously labelled postmodern art.10 A post-postmodern surrealist aesthetic is now very purposefully deployed so that the artist renders visible capital’s commitment to production, fetishised to over-and-above the product/output/commodity. The body must slave away, as always oozing its own substances - a hallmark of Rottenberg’s work. And as ‘oozing’ and abjection have been associated with the feminine, it is women’s bodies that perform the inanity of labour-in-the-service

---


of capital best. The plural is important here. Rottenberg tends to work with ‘exceptional’ bodies, but
the subject of her video - the transfer of value from third world women’s labour to the sites of
consumption - requires that all participating bodies are joined in a shared, undifferentiated
performance.11 The plural materiality of the body is what matters, with class agency having
disappeared altogether, and one wonders what real women workers might have to say had they been
able and willing to watch Squeeze. Mary Boone gallery (or any gallery) is not where such an
opportunity might typically arise; and so, despite the very conscious effort of Rottenberg to imply
also the entrapment of artistic labour in capital’s circles of hell, Squeeze was charged with ‘becoming
what it critiques’, that is, with being exploitative of ‘cheap foreign women’s labor.’ The reviewer adds
that if the artist ‘isn’t critiquing the exploitation of labor’ but ‘is merely drawing an analogy to it, then
does Squeeze ever rise above being the freak show travesty Rottenberg makes it appear?’12

The ‘freak show parody’ fear of this Huff Post review is a reminder of the extreme denigration
of class politics that accompanied the emergence and evolution of neoliberalism since its launch in
the 1970s (in art and culture this denigration was realised as ‘postmodernism’, and the ideological
work of co-opting feminism as postmodernism requires critical attention in feminist historiography).
The review’s two illustrations delivered an accessible ‘visualisation of class & gender’ in their own
right - even as captions: ‘Left: Photo of art dealer Mary Boone holding her newest offering of art, a
cube of refuse manufactured by Latin American and Indian workers seen in Mika Rottenberg’s film
Squeeze (2010). Right: Still from Squeeze depicting Chinese women massaging the feet of unseen
manual laborers in a cramped hut outfitted with human buttocks on the wall behind them.’ To begin
with, the commercial art world, to which women artists have sought access for making a living, has
also been a prestige generator in a stratified system of mass, industrial-scale exclusion and hand-
picked, artisanal inclusion. Mary Boone, called out by The Guerrilla Girls for her men-only approach
for most of the 1970s, had ‘bragged in 1982 that her gallery represented nothing but men: ‘It’s the
men now who are emotional and intuitive... and besides museums just don’t buy paintings by
women’’.13 If this was said as neoliberalism, represented by the Reagan-Thatcher Complex, was

11 On this, see Thomas D. Trummer (ed.), Mika Rottenberg (Cologne: Walther Koenig, 2019) and Mika
Rottenberg: The Production of Luck (Gregory R. Miller & Co / Rose Art Museum, 2014).
12 G. Roger Denson, ‘Mika Rottenberg’s Squeeze Becomes What It Critiques’, Huffington Post, 17 December
2010, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mika-rottenbergs-squeeze-
_1_b_798224?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAA
AfkAB1dBevanV9wKNE-
ZYLGDg9KfwxmUPvHVzb7tMBxVvirdZ6vL6duPBKTDTOPkW9ssGyf2u6uNzIj5s1Fb3H6CG1JNZQlvvV9d3INGoon
uP3g6B3vxy3eyhPVRmgbLKFmNMh9HzQZXNq2J7M._ys6EHQ6viewls0S5ymW_L Accessed 28 September 2020.
Do we need three lines?!? The reviewer asks: ‘What puts Rottenberg in the superior position of critiquing
capitalists who exploit cheap foreign women’s labor when she does the same?’.
of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 87. See also Scott Indrisek, ‘Artists Reflect on Mary Boone’s Legacy a Year after Her
taking off, the inclusion of both women artists and women workers in art’s markets at the moment of neoliberalism’s crisis in 2010 raises questions - questions not about how women are seen when included in the art market context, but rather about how the art market context is seen when it includes women. Sustaining the impression of the capitalist art market as ‘listening’, as ‘learning from...’, as responsive to feminism’s politics of recognition has been essential for separating the cultural usefulness of liberalism from the economic catastrophe that neoliberalism has been - a separation that serves the reproduction of the illusion of reform without end - and, crucially, without revolution.

And yet, the criticisms of Squeeze concerning representation would apply to almost any artistic visualisation of class, insofar as this remains, precisely, a visualisation. The essential difference between Rottenberg’s and Monko’s moving-image deliverance is that whereas the latter provided her actresses with a script that incorporates ‘realistic’ class-based speech, the first relied on the apparent, exaggerated constructedness of the image as such. Neither of the two works hint at any prospect for women’s revolt, while both imply the impossibility of gender-based solidarity - and the emphasis of Squeeze on the compartmentalised, outsourced, geographically dispersed working-class women’s labour adds a layer of complication to this. One however of the two works - Monko’s - humanises the female subject by investing in the specificity of their individual-yet-recognisable circumstances while the other brings into focus the impossible-to-exit massification of labour. That some women workers provide the service of massaging some other workers’ feet does nothing for extricating care labour from its commitment to the reproduction of labour-power as ultimately owned by an always invisible master: capital.

(c) The ‘new spirit of capitalism’ and its (feminine) care values

Unlike the two previous works, Olivia Plender’s Google Office does not engage women or work done by women. Presented in the context of the Taipei Biennial 2010, Google Office is described as a ‘mixed media installation’ or ‘architectural installation’ connected, more broadly, with Plender’s research-based practice that attends to ‘value’: ‘Thematically the piece aimed to interrogate the commodification of knowledge and social relations that has taken place within post-Fordist service-based economies, the collapse of the distinction between work and leisure and the new identity of the entrepreneur’. It is unclear whether by ‘entrepreneur’ this description refers to those who own

14 This description is offered at the Delfina Foundation Residency programme and can be accessed at https://www.delfinafoundation.com/in-residence/olivia-plender/ Accessed 15 October 2020.
Google or to those employed by the firm - that is, the workers populating the offices of Google. A voluminous literature especially after 2010 (when the work was made) informs us about how differently the company treats its employees and how the very work environment where the distinction between work and leisure (allegedly) fades is part of this ‘treat’. Plender’s work differs to all three other works discussed here in that it is not an inherently narrative context. Google Office is based on stillness and deploys, mainly, interior design as its medium. It is, at first sight, a spatialised articulation of the idea of an attractive, colourful, and unconventional office - one, in fact, that the majority of actually existing service workers still do not have. Yet, as Plender explains on her website, Google Office was life size, and so it could be, and was, used by people during the exhibition. (Figs 5 and 6) Visitors could, for example, play table tennis - and it is this image of a man and a woman playing table tennis that appears next to the work description: ‘The installation contains five different zones and was designed as a functional space to host talks and seminars’ while the free Wi-Fi facilitated a broader occupation of the space by people ‘genuinely playing or working unaware that they had become performers in the piece’.

There is perhaps a subtle proposition here that the employees enjoying such an office are also unaware performers, and what they perform is the attractiveness of work for the privileged of the labour force. The labour of those contributing ‘talks and seminars’ as part of the artwork is implicitly drawn into the actualisation of the ideology of the attractiveness of work, and it is hard to see how the artist’s ‘satire on the contemporary workplace’ would not encompass the institutions where the encounter with art takes place as such a workplace. And this happens because the encounter with art is also based on the encounter between work and leisure, both of which are constituted in relation to class - for besides the intellectual labour taking place through the social engagement aspects of the work, that is the labour that visibly enters the artwork, we can reasonably assume that the invisible labour of the feminised cleaner is essential for maintaining both the artwork and the exhibition as a whole. The loss of distinction between work and leisure is scripted then as a prominent class issue, the same as the structural frameworks that allow for the visualisation or not of class.

The fact that Google represents also the loss of distinction between work and leisure for the millions that use the company’s search engine and email service expands the remit of the piece significantly: it’s as if the mentality of a new organisation of labour that Google Office presents as

---


‘pleasant’ material form is one side of the coin. The other side of the coin is the abstract form of labour that becomes dominant in so-called post-industrial societies after the end of the Cold War. The switch to a service economy and a managerial ethos (with significant repercussions for artistic labour as well) possibly pale in significance when we consider the fusion, in these contexts, of production and social reproduction. This has been important for the feminisation of labour overall, which denotes (as always when the feminine as value is implicated) that labour becomes of lesser value. The pioneering working conditions enjoyed (or not) by Google employees to boost productivity in the company’s actual offices have been translated into ‘working from home’ for the freelancers of the creative industries or for contract-based workers. The erosion of domestic space as the opposite of the workspace has been discussed at length across many disciplines. The same is the case with the Working from Home (WFH) imperative that was formalised in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is now common knowledge that ‘we’re still stuck with the same issues of too much work and not enough space to do it – with women often getting the short end of the stick’. It is not an accident that press outlets for neoliberalism tried to describe the pandemic as ‘the great equalizer for women’, despite the criticisms by women in so-called ‘middle-class’ professions (including Higher Education). In the second half of 2020, the general acceptance that ‘by altering attitudes toward WFH, COVID-19 may have forever changed the way we work’ made this abstract form of labour display its very material ground. It should be obvious that WFH (hardly unrelated to class) is possible precisely because of the formidable impact on what Marx called ‘forces of production’, and specifically technology, that Google represents and leads.

The above paragraph serves as a cursory ‘capitalist realism’ framework (in the memorable phrasing of Mark Fisher) for situating Plender’s Google Office in the narrative of class composition that rests on the dialectic between production and reproduction. To begin with, the Google Office (the artwork and the actual office, approximating a legend in neoliberal/business literature) appears to be the architectural incarnation of the ‘artistic critique’ that capital appropriated to undermine the ‘social critique’ put forward by labour, as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiappelo demonstrate in The New Spirit of

Capitalism. Google Office is colourful, comfortable, and registers the combination of waged labour with the worker’s replenishment. The real Google Office has been hailed as a workspace that is also the space of play and relaxation. If social reproduction theory has asked who produces the worker who produces the commodity, Google Office is an answer that wouldn’t necessarily include the word ‘woman’. This is another use for the entrepreneurial dream as class privilege: to obscure the continuous exploitation of women’s work in social reproduction.

That Google Office is, to this day, more of an advertisement than a generally observed workspace architecture is less of interest than the fantasy it enacts. It is a fantasy that appears to have learned from feminism, or at least to have appropriated some of the ‘care’ values that feminists have pointed out as the opposite of the cut-throat competitive work environment of the capitalist firm. Boltanski and Chiapello’s study, published in French in 1999 and translated into English almost two decades later, is not concerned with how gendered values are imbricated in labour under capitalism. It was in 2016 when Nancy Fraser dared point to these omissions in her essay ‘Second-Wave Feminism and the ‘New Spirit of Capitalism’.’ Fraser did not see as an accident that second-wave feminism thrived in the conditions of this new spirit. Drawing attention to how ‘rigid organizational hierarchies would give way to horizontal teams and flexible networks, thereby liberating individual creativity’, she remarks that ‘the result was a new romance of capitalism with real-world effects—a romance that enveloped the tech start-ups of Silicon Valley and that today finds its purest expression in the ethos of Google’. She goes on:

Disturbing as it may sound, I am suggesting that second-wave feminism has unwittingly provided a key ingredient of the new spirit of neoliberalism. Our critique of the family wage now supplies a good part of the romance that invests flexible capitalism with a higher meaning and a moral point. [...] Once the centrepiece of a radical analysis of capitalism’s androcentrism, it serves today to intensify capitalism’s valorization of waged labour. [...] After all, this capitalism would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution, as it builds a new regime of accumulation on the cornerstone of women’s waged labour, and seeks to disembed markets from social regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale.

---

22 This issue is also omitted in the book’s first presentation in English, a year after its publication in French. See Sebastian Budgen, ‘A New ‘Spirit of Capitalism’’, New Left Review 1 (Jan.-Feb. 2000), pp. 149-156.
Although Fraser makes some (four) salient points about how second-wave feminism found itself on the side of the capitalist class, none of these address social reproduction and care labour. And yet, second-wave feminism placed the gendered experience of domestic everydayness centre-stage. That patriarchal capitalism has relied on the aggressive devaluation of ‘women’s work’ was flagged up across diverse sites of feminist critique - from movements such as Wages for Housework to works of an international feminist film vanguard such as Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielmann, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Belgium 1975) and Lizzie Borden’s *Born in Flames* (USA 1983).\(^\text{25}\) The accommodation of care values by post-Fordism indicates that post-Cold War neoliberalism, shaped in the 1990s, is exemplified in notions of the new office space and new productive ethos that became identified with Google. Significantly, for this analysis of visualisation of class, the Google office space and ethos were presented as a privilege that middle-class tech employees could enjoy, but that could potentially be made available to more white-collar employees. Capitalism, it seemed, had its own vanguard, and this rested on the fusion of production and social reproduction, or ‘male’ and ‘female’ values. This is what Plender’s *Google Office* demonstrated in 2010, when, following the 2008 global financial crisis, a revival of feminism’s interest in class and work had already been scripted as the new wave of research in social reproduction theory, lasting to this day, and evident also in art.\(^\text{26}\)

The myth of Google Office was short-lived, even if it mostly lived after Plender captured its ‘new spirit’ in an artwork in 2010. By 2017, the Damore Memo, concerning how Google should deal with the biological differences affecting the productivity of male and female employees, had become a media sensation.\(^\text{27}\) A lawsuit that started also in 2017 highlighted the mechanisms by which Google pushed female employees to lower wages and careers.\(^\text{28}\) The transformation of the Google office (as a capitalist myth) into an artwork (with its apparent ties to fiction, utopia, but also irony) by an artist invested in historical research on feminist struggles and the evolution of capitalism’s discourse on work connotes the shift in the feminist consciousness of the 21st century.\(^\text{29}\) *Google Office* is a subtle yet poignant moment of feminist self-reflection in art and about art - one in which gender, but also


\(^{26}\) Indicatively, see Bina Choi et al. (eds), *The Grand Domestic Revolution Goes On* (Utrecht and London: CASCO Office for Art, Design and Theory and Bedford Press, 2010).

\(^{27}\) A detailed account of the memo, and the chain of events after it, can be found at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google%27s_Ideological_Echo_Chamber](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Google%27s_Ideological_Echo_Chamber) Accessed 15 October 2020.


feminist critique, are registered as terrains for valorisation for capital in ways that depart from second-wave feminism’s emphasis in the consumption of femininity as image/sign.30

(d) The ‘subversion of community’: From women to capital

Melanie Gilligan’s Popular Unrest is a sci fi film, the plot of which unfolds when ‘the complete domination of life by exchange value’ has been achieved.31 Gilligan’s focus nonetheless is on how opposition to this subjugation of life is expressed in a society where capital is so normative as to have been deified - turned into a superior externality to the world of human affairs and acting from this metaphysical, or at least supernatural, above as ‘the spirit’. Capital, that is, has turned into a force that controls production but only as a side operation. For capital’s main function in this future, conceived in 2010, is to enact its rule as necro/biopolitics: the management of who is to live and who is to die, but without apparent justification. The brutality of this rule is realised (or better, materialised) when, in the film, a knife falls occasionally from an invisible ‘above’ on a human body: the invisible hand of the market and the invisible hand of one’s ‘maker’ have become one. Popular Unrest is thus a horror film in which ‘science fiction’ is a trope for speaking about a social truth that was broadly settling in post-2008: expulsion from the world of capital is expulsion from the means of keeping oneself alive. It’s as if Gilligan had paid heed to Malcolm Bull’s captivating assessment of capitalist globalisation as biopolitics, offered in 2007: ‘the primary problem remains [...] of how to extract from the global economy the means to stay alive’.32

The concept of ‘the masses’ is, significantly, revived in Gilligan’s narrative, as we watch a lot of people rioting, but while these people are clearly not privileged, their place in production remains unspecified. The people feel the urge to gather in public places and meet in groups with the prospect of enacting ‘something’ collective - maybe these ‘somethings’ can be described as communities, maybe not. The work’s website poses this question: ‘do these groupings offer a way out?’ For Jasper Bernes however, Gilligan’s film works involve the concept of community at large. In his ‘Capital and Community: On Melanie Gilligan’s Trilogy’ (2015), Bernes notes:

All three entries in the trilogy concern themselves, in important ways, with the falseness of these sorts of hopes, with the bad collectivities of capitalism and the ways in which capital – allegorised in Popular Unrest as an all-computing digital

‘World Spirit’ – subsumes human intentions and desires, ‘entraining’ individuals to a community that is not an escape from egoistical calculation but rather its hypostasy. These films do a great service, in this regard, by lancing some of the naïve optimism that often attaches to these developments. Gilligan reminds us that capital is already its own common, its own common sense.33

The two other films making up Gilligan’s trilogy are Crisis in the Credit System (2008), hailed as a prophetic reference to the inevitability of the then imminent globally felt financial crisis, and Common Sense (2015), a complex techno-futuristic meditation on how capitalism is likely to pervert the dreams for a dissolution of the gap between production and social reproduction through the use of advanced corporeal technologies. I say ‘dreams’ because a strand of left feminist thought, beginning with Shulamith Firestone’s Dialectic of Sex (1975) and all the way to Sophie Lewis’ Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism against Family (2019), has connected women’s emancipation to various kinds of advanced technology centering on the body. Although then Gilligan’s Common Sense might seem, at first sight, a better candidate for engaging in this analysis of class and gender, I have opted to include Popular Unrest, its predecessor, precisely because it departs from a focus on women’s work - despite Gilligan’s notable involvement in debates on feminist politics and labour.34 Indeed, Gilligan’s film of 2009, Self-Capital, personifies all roles as female - ‘the actress [Penelope McGhie] appears in the films as two therapists, their subject, a receptionist, and a bookstore cashier’ - as this work sketches the failed subjects that the glorification of ‘self-care’ in our societies constantly generates.35 The emphasis on care labour in contemporary feminism is, in Gilligan’s work, explicitly appropriated by neoliberalism at a systemic level to induce the ideology of the self as one’s ‘capital’ (femininity as capital brought to the dating market has been explored by other artists as well).36 Yet, the departure from women’s work in Popular Unrest allows for an updated critique of the narrativisation of community in terms of women’s capacity to sustain and reproduce social cohesion. This is a highly conservative social script where typically one encounters mention of women as biologically predisposed to care (as the notorious Google Memo had it: that women ultimately care more about people than about things; the idea that women as heads of state care more about citizens than male heads of state reproduces

this binary today, amidst the global health systems crisis that neoliberalism experienced with Covid-19). 37

But Marxist feminists have been identified with the opposite script: that ‘to the degree that the working class has been able to organise mass struggles in the community, rent strikes, struggles against inflation generally, the basis has always been the unceasing informal organization of women there’, and also that ‘in struggles in the cycles of direct production women’s support and organization, formal and informal, has been decisive’. This is asserted by Mariarossa Dalla Costa and Selma James in their foundational pamphlet ‘Women and the Subversion of Community’, dating back to 1971. 38

But what follows these words is that insurgent community building has not led to any gains addressing women’s subordination: ‘the spoils of the victor belonged to the class ‘in general’. 39

In Popular Unrest, comprised of five 15-minute-long episodes, there exist no spoils for the victor if by ‘victor’ one would refer to the working class. In fact, although labour and value both exist, there is no working class, either traditionally defined as the industrial proletariat or reconceived in terms of services provision. In the world of Popular Unrest, capital has ceased being interested in labour and is interested in production and what this can encompass. All human activities and capacities are connected with valorisation. Labour, as we shall see, is a matter of what the system needs (or does not need) for its optimisation which is perceived as self-optimisation. The system is run by the Spirit, a mysterious yet omnipotent entity.

The film opens with scenes of popular unrest filmed in streets as the news inform the global public that a series of inexplicable murders committed with a knife that falls on the victim from above, as we often imagine ‘fate’. The mysterious killings are one thread of the plot, the other being the forming of groups by people who suddenly feel the urge to meet others. The film follows one of these ‘groupings’, in London, whose members - of diverse races and genders, employed or unemployed, affected individually by the murders or not - initially think that their urge to meet, the connection they feel with one another, and the comfort they share, are signs of their developing agency. A team of scientists approaches the London group under the pretext that it can help them figure out why the killings happen. (Figs 7 and 8) The scientists enlighten the group about the fact that the murders are

38 For the purposes of this research I used the pamphlet published at this link: https://libcom.org/files/Dalla%20Costa%20and%20James%20-%20Women%20and%20the%20Subversion%20of%20Community.pdf Accessed 28 October 2020. The quotation is on p. 13.
39 Ibid.
committed by the Spirit and, also, that their coming together is an effect of the Spirit: the groupings represent a fraction in the Spirit’s time where social exchange freezes. The group doubt this at first, refusing that they have no free will, but proof builds up and they agree to enter a series of experiments that become gradually very manipulative. Eventually, the group’s little act of doubt is to contact one of the so-called architects of the Spirit world: this is the only individual that stands out in the plot, and it is a mature, white, highly educated woman. Formerly a top researcher at an Ivy League university, she started her career as an economist working on networks, but later on retired from the Spirit ‘project’ or got fired. The older white woman explains to a young South-Asian woman (the London group representative) all about the Spirit and why the killings happen: in order to reach to every crevice of life and subsume it to production, the Spirit learns from human behaviour and is thinking always ahead of the human hive’s actions. To do this, it learns from human emotions. It is the affect, feelings, care, rage, and so on, that the Spirit needs so as the organise itself as life (beyond the biological and social distinction). The Spirit’s aim being optimisation of collective productivity, it must calculate how much social labour it needs and expel the rest. This act of expulsion of labour is the killings. This doesn’t help with what the London group could do to stop the killings. In the final episode, the group realises that the Spirit cannot be killed anymore because it is the collective outcome of everyone’s action of participating in the system. The Spirit, in fact, resolves the issue of its own malfunction as a killing algorithm by creating a protective safety bubble where only some of humanity will reside and labour. Billions of others will be left outside, to be destroyed. In the concluding scene, these millions begin to realise what their fate is, and we see them filling the streets in protest. It is a surprise to hear, in this ending, the real news of 2010 in different languages, including in my own mother tongue, Greek. This news was about the people’s real uprisings - the ‘αγανακτισμένοι’, the indignados that became the insurgents of the global financial crisis.

Although in 2010 the film was able to end with this hopeful message about class politics, over ten years later it is impossible to not note that Gilligan’s less optimistic insights proved right: the Spirit, or the capitalist law of exchange won, by promising protection to the few. The communities of maybe-agency were motivated by a sense of injustice but lacked either class consciousness or belief in an alternative to capitalism (Gilligan deals with this in her film by having a character ask dismissively ‘what do you want, communism?’ No one answers ‘actually, yes’). Popular Unrest deals thus with the impossibility of enacting class struggle in a stage of capitalism where production and social reproduction have merged in a nightmarishly real subsumption. It is this fear that we see running across Gilligan’s films: that the revolutionary feminist demand for ending the divide between production and reproduction will be executed by capital, in capital’s interest, and not by the autonomous collective consciousness of women in the struggle. It is thus no accident that the central
character in *Popular Unrest* is a ‘successful’, mature, white woman academic who at some point withdraws in seeing the effects of the social architecture she contributed to bringing forth - and if the film’s concealed real time would be 2010, this woman would have been among those who had fought for change in second-wave feminism. The woman’s withdrawal upon the realisation of her (unwitting?) complicity rather than her active engagement with the London group in stopping the killings is the film’s core ideological moment: atomisation prevails when you know you are likely to be safe and ‘counted in’, when tiredness wins over the struggle and the exhaustion or even destruction it will bring, when the revolution is a *political* fate you can afford to not share even if *ethically* you dislike the effects of capital as a social relation. *Popular Unrest* is thus a powerful indictment about what second-wave feminism really lost in not breaking with capitalist production: the power to subvert the communities of capital. In *Popular Unrest*, women possess no special power and certainly no *memory* of women’s struggles. Women are everywhere (as individuals) but nowhere (as collective praxis). They can contribute nothing that could help realise revolutionary communities against capital’s communities. When the power to subvert community gets transferred from women to capital, class becomes invisible and feminism extinct.

### III. Class struggle and feminism against the social reproduction of capitalism

The four works that provide the focus of this analysis represent aspects of the encounter of feminist critique with the crisis of neoliberalism - a crisis in full view in 2010, which is why this year was chosen as the anchor of this research. Was this crisis of neoliberalism also a crisis of feminism? It is emotionally hard to raise the issue, even if in the form of a question. Yet the rift that marked feminism in the decade that followed (2011-2020) between the return to the streets of a multi-faceted anti-capitalist feminism (symbolised by, but not limited to, the transnational Women’s Strike movement) and a neo/liberal feminism that pushed further for individual women’s integration within a devastatingly unjust *status quo* (encapsulated in the ‘lean-in’ position) is a strong argument for saying so.40 Crucially, both Kathi Weeks’ *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (2011) and Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (2013), representative of the feminist rift that the global financial crisis exacerbated, centre on work - and this is to say that work has not been the focus exclusively of the feminist left, as a matter of course, but, rather, has been the key terrain of a battle. This battle has been internal to feminism, but...  

---

only as a superstructural articulation of the material conditions of the production-reproduction nexus. It is in this complex framework that post-2008 feminism has returned to class.

Cinzia Arruzza’s aptly titled essay ‘From Women’s Strikes to a New Class Movement: The Third Feminist Wave’ (2018) includes a reference to Google’s sexual-harassment scandal that saw its workers taking also to the streets, shattering the company’s ‘good, caring firm’ image, but also posed these important questions: ‘What are we talking about when we talk about women’s strikes? Is this class struggle or a new feminist wave?’\(^{41}\) The question that logically follows is: what has led to thinking about class struggle and feminism in terms of a disjunction, in terms of an ‘or’? A few months before Arruzza’s disturbing formulation, Susan Watkins had analysed the methodical containment of the feminist revolution since the 1970s, which, notably, occurred not through suppression but through... funding.\(^{42}\) Watkins’ observation that ‘advances in gender equality have gone hand-in-hand with soaring economic inequality across most of the world’ corroborated the criticisms (which address different aspects of the same issue) of Nancy Fraser and Hester Eisenstein, voiced a decade earlier, in 2009.\(^{43}\) But, in my view at least, Watkins’ salient contribution to the critique of an averted feminist revolution was to bring together evidence about how capitalism managed to do this through (a) strategies of selective appropriation of feminist arguments that trafficked between theory and practice and that, thanks to US hegemony, were to be globally influential; and (b) through a class project that pacified middle-class women while it enslaved or disempowered millions of working-class women. Recent calls from the Marxist feminist left for a ‘feminism for the 99%’ are, nonetheless, an acknowledgement of the fact that capital accumulation in the 21st century is impacting women overall so negatively as to permit the re-launching of a trans-class feminist agenda that would exclude only something close to the 1%.\(^{44}\)

Looking back to 2010, we see that the issues that were to become central to feminism as a social movement - the third wave, as argued convincingly by Arruzza\(^{45}\) - in the following decade were


\(^{44}\) See Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser, Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto (London: Verso, 2019).

\(^{45}\) On the question of ‘wave’, it is worth quoting Arruzza at length: ‘The current one is not the fourth or even the fifth feminist wave. It is the third and arrives around 40 years after the end of the second. In the past few decades there has been a certain tendency to label as “feminist wave” movements of thought that took place especially within campuses and their surroundings. These currents of thought have marked important turning points within feminist theory; however, they were not rooted in processes of mass social and political mobilization comparable to the feminist movement of the Sixties and Seventies. So, if with “wave” we intend to indicate a process of social and political subjectivation that takes place through mass insurgency, the term is
already scripted into the work of artists who had integrated feminism into their political education: the complex role of gender in the articulation of class (Monko), the feminisation of a global working class that capital has been able to divide geographically (Rottenberg), the appropriation of the critique of the divide between production and social reproduction by the capitalist firm (Plender), the possibility that women’s entry specifically to capitalist production fostered, rather than subverted, the increasing subjugation of life to capital (Gilligan). The engagement with class politics in all four works makes manifest an anxiety about how women, values associated with femininity, and feminism have been connected with an expansion of capital as a social relation - which, in turn, bespeaks of a reflective attitude with regard to how to take forward the feminist struggle. The aim of drawing a connection between works that address relationships of production and reproduction in different national or transnational settings (from the so-called ‘post-socialist’ context to the First-World, but globally dominant, firm), and in temporalities that implicate past, present and future, is intended to show that an incipient global feminism was in the making in 2010, but in conditions not of its own choosing (to remember Marx) - that is, in conditions which disallowed, at least in women artists’ imagery, an altogether positive re-appraisal of a past feminist revolution while they asserted a critical focus on a troubling contemporary.

To the extent that Arruzza’s argument about the emergence of a Third Wave is valid, we see that the relationship between the Second and Third Waves was, already in 2010, not articulated in terms of a mother-daughter relationship, as per the salient feminist art historical scholarship of the 1990s.46 The works examined here register levels and figurations of intersectional critique that move feminism in art beyond the evolution of feminism in the field - beyond, that is, the relationship of a generation of women artists with the one that preceded them. If in the 1990s, feminist art historical scholarship had to avert the danger of post-feminism as a reactionary ideology of situated privilege (mothers did a revolution, daughters could live happily ever after), the 2000s dispelled any such threat as feminism was proven, in the words of Angela Davis, to ‘involve so much more than gender equality and it involves so much more than gender’.47 This should be also a starting point for returning to the feminist second wave in order to re-examine not whether a feminist revolution in art succeeded or

not (which would betray the subjugation of feminist thought to capital’s ideology of measurable ‘impact’) but for thinking what lessons in political education that moment might have to offer. Such lessons are of salient significance for seeing through the conflicts of the feminist struggle in a century that, so far, disaffirms narratives of emancipatory progress while it defeats any lingering illusions about capitalism’s necessary commitment to liberal democracy (typically used to avert attention from a class war mostly waged from above). In revising and completing this article in March 2022, when, globally, capitalism is articulated as intersecting crises of phenomenally violent scales, the transnational feminist struggle is facing challenges that were unimaginable to many of us in 2010. Learning lessons and having the time to being taught from history is, increasingly, a privilege. At this moment, we do not know for how long, and to whom, the privilege will be available. While it lasts, to the places it is still possible, for those who see in this privilege a need, feminist art history’s contribution to an urgent learning from history cannot but entail a rethinking of the revolutionary deficit as much as of what needs to be overthrown for the feminist horizon to exist. The artworks addressed here constitute evidence of the critical complexity and diversity that such a rethinking would entail, but also evidence that such a rethinking is already part of a political consciousness that refuses to keep gender and class apart.