Images of Women

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Abstract

Images of Women, which took place in Copenhagen in March 1970, at the same time as the first political interventions of the feminist movement, the “Redstockings”, was the first feminist art exhibition in Scandinavia. The essay analyses the content of this collaborative project and demonstrates how the artists radically appropriated the exhibition space as a platform for political confrontation and involvement, while upholding the idea of artistic space as a utopian space. Thus the exhibition addressed the actual social situation of women as well as their position within the representational field.

On 10 April 1970 the first feminist art exhibition in Denmark, Damebilleder (Images of Women), opened in two of the non-commercial platforms for experimental contemporary art in Copenhagen, Rådskælderen (the students’ council), at the Academy of Fine Arts, and Trefoldigheden (The Trinity), a temporary exhibition building linked to the Den frie Udstillingsbygning (Free Exhibition Building). The exhibition was organised by a group of female artists who had come together to work on shared projects while establishing Kanonklubben (The Canon Club), an independent department at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.1 Several of the artists had in various ways been in contact with the experimental art milieux of the 1960s, such as the situationists, Fluxus and Eks-Skolen. The participants were the artists Rikke Diemer, Kirsten Dufour, Jytte Keller, Gitte Skjold Jensen, Kirsten Justesen, Jytte Rex, plus Lene Bille and Marie Bille.

The exhibition consisted of seven alternating tableaux of spatial installations and actions. Each tableau consisted of an image based on a slogan of that time: The Whore, “an image of the woman as a sexual object”; Dish Washing, “a image of the woman’s place in the home”; The Wedding Cake, “an image of marriage as an untouchable institution”; Beauty, “an image of the woman as an object of beauty”; The Defence, “an image of struggle”; The Garments, “an image of women’s solidarity”; The Camp and The Celebration, “an image of rebellion, will, enthusiasm and love”. The series of images also formed a sequence, a story of the development from oppression to liberation.

1 See Lars Bang Larsen: Kanonklubben: The Oslo Trip and The Garden, Section 6.
In the first tableau, *The Whore*, a room was seen through a glass door equipped with a bed, a bedside table and a chair, and lit by an ultraviolet lamp – in the same way as in the Red Light District of Amsterdam. Here the artists sat in turns, wearing only a blonde wig, panties and bra. In its direct confrontation the tableau stressed the inescapably gendered meanings of the body and emphatically pointed out the role of the woman as object – subjected to the male gaze and masculine dominance. *The Whore* creates an acute awareness of women’s oppression in patriarchy through the presentation of an image of the woman as a body and a commodity framed by a situation where she waits and offers herself for sale in a shop window display. The undressed and posing woman of the whore-tableau simultaneously mimes art history’s gallery of naked women and with it a long tradition in the visual arts of assuming a parallel between female beauty and the beauty of the image, which places the woman’s body at the centre of the economy of art (Nead 1993).

In the second tableau, *Dish Washing*, all the participating artists had brought their dirty dishes and placed them in the exhibition space. The metonymic displacement of the body with the abject physicality of the piles of dirty and smelly kitchen utensils points to the oppressed body as an unacknowledged and invisible economy.

Parallel to this tableau in Rådskælderen the action called *The Wedding Cake* took place as the third tableau at the exhibition building Trefoldigheden in Østerbro. The building was wrapped like a wedding cake in white nylon ribbons that were pulled like undulating lace around the entire building and crowned by a bride and groom in the shape of dressed wax mannequins on the roof. Like Jean Claude’s and Christo’s wrapping of institutions in the late 1960s, the wrapping highlighted the exhibition building as a ritual, transforming space and satirised the cliché of marriage as women’s highest goal – replacing it with another goal, the ritually occupied exhibition space.² As such, it remained in place while the series of tableaux of the exhibition continued in Rådskælderen.

In the fourth tableau, *Beauty*, the entire basement was lined with pink plastic. Here a demonstrator from Max Factor placed herself with her make-up products. Through this commonplace and everyday interpretation of beauty, the concept was set within the capitalist framework of the department store rather than the philosophical register of aesthetic theory, thus unmasking “beauty” as an ideal concept and pointing out its purely industrial and economic

² Christo and Jean-Claude had completed two of their first monumental wrapping projects, the Kunsthalle Bern 1967–68, at its fiftieth anniversary exhibition arranged by Harald Szeemann, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago 1968–69.