

Re/Sisters: A Lens on Gender and Ecology

Barbican, London, 5 October to 14 January

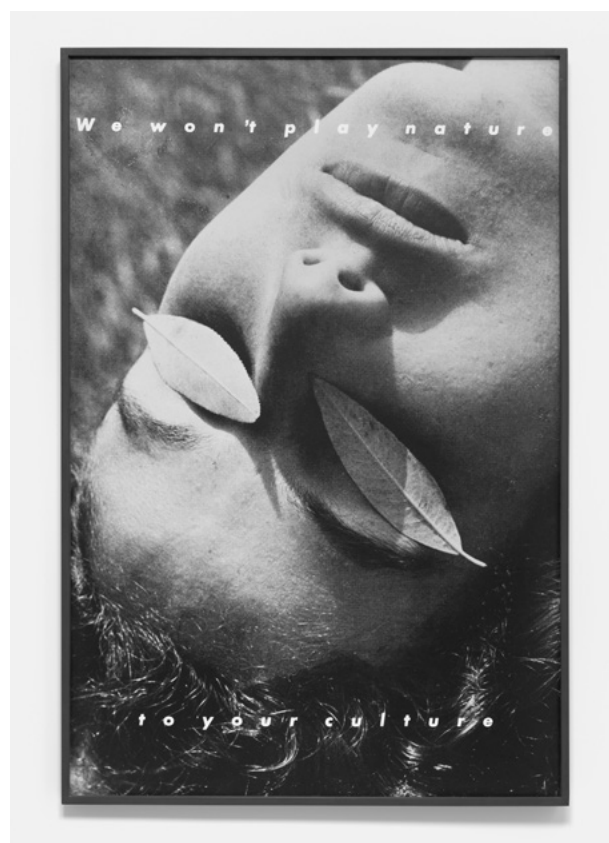
'Re/Sisters', a major group exhibition, offers a global exploration of the relationship between gender and ecology through the lens of more than 50 women and non-conforming gender artists. Focused primarily on the medium of film and photography, the curator, Alona Pardo, with the assistance of Colm Guo-Lin Peare, has brought together a ground-breaking selection of work that sheds light on key issues relating to the continuing ecological crisis. Organised thematically in six sections, the exhibition looks at the politics of extraction, acts of protest and survival, the labour of ecological care and fluidity, and the queerness of human and non-human bodies.

As we enter the gallery space, a photostat by Barbara Kruger reproduces a glamorous face of a woman framed by the sentence 'We won't play nature to your culture'. It vividly sets the political tone of the exhibition. Kruger's visual message perfectly encapsulates the invitation of 'Re/Sisters' to reflect on feminist resistance and its goal of dismantling the patriarchal (binary) economy according to which the category of 'woman' has been historically equated with that of 'nature', therefore devalued and excluded from dominant (male) culture. How, though, is the oppression of women and the degradation of the planet linked together, and how can this connection be visually narrated?

The first section of the exhibition explores the violent impact of extractive industries and their impact on indigenous communities. The viewer is first confronted with large aerial photographs of open-pit mines taken above the Pilbara region in Australia by Simryn Gill. These appear as dramatic earth wounds, and, although it is not the intention of the artist to aestheticise them, they ultimately appear as hauntingly sublime spectacles. In the same section, Otobong Nkanga uses the remains of the copper mine in Tsumeb (Namibia) to recall its colonial history, while the work of Carolina Caycedo, Sim Chi Yin, Mabe Bethônico and Taloi Havini evoke the material impact of extractive activities on rivers and dams, from Colombia to Vietnam. Again, there is a risk of being immediately seduced by the psychedelic patchwork of vivid blue-greens that make up the wasteland filmed by Havini in the ruins of a copper mine in Papua New Guinea. Reading the wall caption, it becomes clear that the colours are the result of polluting and corroding agents. How might I refrain from applying my western gaze and the easy 'beautification' of the disasters depicted here? Is the scale and the overwhelming intensity of each work a curatorial strategy for sensitising the viewer, calling for a more responsive de-centred gaze?

In contrast with Kruger's conceptual appropriation of images from fashion magazines, Chloe Dewe Mathews has photographed a young woman submerged in visceral crude oil, a ritual that is presented as a healing shamanic experience. This work has an affective and somehow disturbing effect which, however, leaves me with the open question of where the intersection between art, ecology and activism really lies.

The focus on ecofeminism and its political instances becomes more explicit in the second section of the exhibition, 'Mutation: Protest and Survival'. Directly inspired by the work of French activist Françoise



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We won't play nature to your culture)*, 1983

d'Eaubonne and her seminal 1974 book *Feminism or Death*, ecofeminism refers here to the programme of mobilising and sensitising as many 'sisters' as possible as a response to the two immediate threats of death: overpopulation and the destruction of natural resources by the patriarchal capitalist system. Mutation, according to d'Eaubonne, does not consist of giving 'power to the women' but of 'the destruction of power by women'.

Poignant examples of ecofeminist mobilisation are represented in this section by anti-nuclear protests organised by women in the 1980s, both in UK and US. The pictures taken by the collective Format photographers at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire and by Joan E Biren at the Women's Encampment for the Future of Peace and Justice at the Seneca Army Depot are deeply inspiring and uplifting. They capture the very peaceful, joyful spirit of both protests and reveal how their creative actions relied much on the disarming power of humour and the liberatory power of pleasure in contrast with the repressive (and repressed) militarised male forces. Embracing a more contemporary context and a wider latitude, other works in this section show the emergence of new holistic forms of reportage (or *rapportage*) developed in direct dialogue with local militants and indigenous communities. This includes, for example, the nuanced photographs of artist/activist Poulomi Basu, who succeeded in portraying the women fighters in the remote 'red' corridor in India; or the moving work by Pamela Singh, who has employed elegant selenium prints to frame the Chipko Tree huggers of the Himalayas – Indian women who successfully used their bodies as human shields against deforestation. Reaching the Arctic, Susan Schuppli's outstanding film essay *Cold Rights*, 2022, closes this section with a sharp investigation on the 'right' of ice to remain cold, as advocated by the Inuk activist Sheila Watt-Cloutier.

I found this 12-minute film pedagogically informative and powerful in explaining the complex issue of sovereignty in the Arctic since the melting of the polar ice caps began.

Moving on to the other parts of the exhibition, the shift from documentary photography to rituals and embodied performative practices emerges as a predominant artistic strategy when dealing with the issue of care, the 'Commons' and bodies. Along with pioneering and experimental work exploring the practice of care, such as *Touch Sanitation*, 1978–80, by Mierle Laderman Ukeles or *Terrestri: Rescued Earth*, 1982, by Hélène Aylon, 'Re/Sisters' offers numerous intersected paths and strategies to break the binary paradigms of nature/culture, male/female, public/private.

What constitutes care has become a hotly debated topic in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, the discourse often polarised by neoliberal conceptions of self-care and the imperative of social care. The legacy of feminism and the understanding of care as a practice of interdependency becomes precious when shifting from the hetero-nuclear family into the co-existence with other species. Through the earth works by Ana Mendieta, the fireworks performances by Judy Chicago, the quasi-pagan rituals of the Neo-Naturists, as well as the cross-species imagined by Uýra and the astonishing psychedelic marine animation by Anne Duk Hee Jordan, the exhibition does suggest that fluidity, not just performativity, helps us to envisage (and indeed to trouble) essentialist definitions of gender and subsequently to establish a new relationship with nature.

The 2016 *Nocturnal Gardening* video installation by melanie bonajo, the final part of the artist's 'Night Soil Trilogy', is perhaps the most accomplished work in the show that nurtures this vision. Structured through the lives of four women – a Navajo-land-rights activist, a palaeolithic revivalist and forest forager, a food justice organiser, and a woman pig farmer who encourages kinship between humans and other-than-humans – the piece presents the very possibility of embracing alternative lifestyles that reject capitalist value systems. These women are striving for connections with other communities, plants, animals and the elements. As the Navajo woman says, 'if we think about plants and animals as our relatives, we can treat them as such, we can provide care for them, and this could be the foundation of a new economy, of an indigenous renaissance'.

Further, as d'Eaubonne suggests, 'the way out of the tunnel is the 'egalitarian administration of a world being reborn (and no longer "protected" as the soft, first-wave ecologists believed)'.

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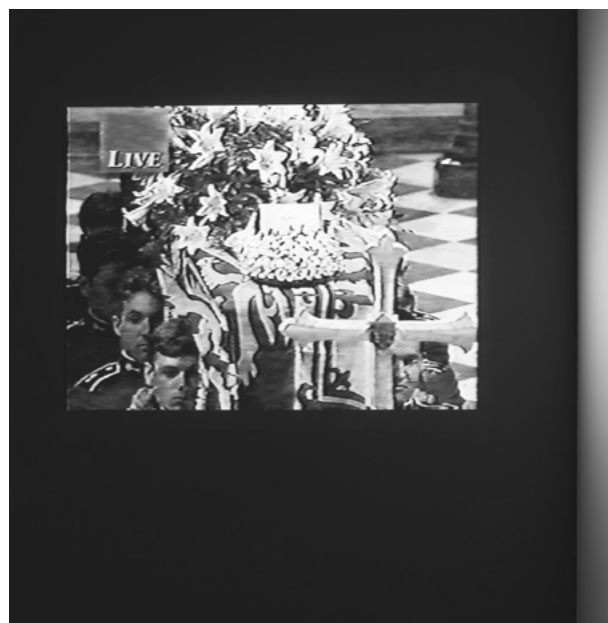
Lutz Bacher: AYE!

Raven Row, London, 5 October to 17 December

'AYE!', curated by Anthony Huberman, focuses on the sonic aspects of Lutz Bacher's work. In an accompanying essay, Huberman describes how Bacher imagined filling each room of an institution with a different sound, voice or song – the artist died in 2019 before the completion of the exhibition. Huberman suggested Raven Row, which is located in two 18th-century silk mercers' houses and has the feel of a domestic home replete with three floors of rococo rooms to the front, and a lower ground floor to the rear, yielding the brightness and open layout of a modern extension. Even this area, though, is subdivided for the exhibition. The viewer must progress in stages, room by room, door by door. The result is that separate works are rarely seen together but may be heard in unison, in the way a seemingly innocent melody or shriek might bleed between the rooms of a haunted house at a funfair.

On the first floor, *PLEASE (LC)*, 2013–15, features overlapping projected slivers of Leonard Cohen singing, edited so he only pleads 'please' on an interminable loop. Bacher has concocted a broken record. His act of performing has been distilled down to begging to be liked, or perhaps hoping we might let him escape from this purgatory of eternal performance. The sound leaks out to the next room, a stack of spiky foam sound absorbers – *Magic Mountain*, 2015 – which sits in front of a fireplace and mops up none of Cohen's continuous wailing. Another room along, and *Horses*, 2008, comprises six plaster moulds of horse necks loosely bound with wire and string. They seem to emerge from the floor bent in silent arched-neck howls, as if muffled, encased and buried alive like the guard dog of Pompeii frozen in agony by the infernal ash of Vesuvius.

On the top floor, James Earl Jones, who was also the voice of Darth Vader, recites the gospel of St Matthew, Chapter One, in *Sweet Jesus*, 2008. The voice is slowed such that it feels less like the word of God than the word of the Devil. It's a minor shift, but then Satan was only ever a fallen angel. The speaker is pointed at an open window out onto the rooftops of London beyond, where it is quietly absorbed. In the background, we hear a soundtrack of three radios tuned



Lutz Bacher, *Untitled (Diana)*, 1997, video

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