

'52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone' at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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'52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone', The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, 6 June 2022 – 8 January 2023

'52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone' was a landmark exhibition at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, Connecticut. The premise of the exhibition was a revisitation of a 1971 show curated by the now legendary Lucy R Lippard, titled 'Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists'. Lippard's artists were exhibited at the Aldrich alongside the work of twenty-six emerging artists whose work resonates with current feminist themes. The new exhibition was the brainchild of Senior Curator Amy Smith-Stewart, who worked in collaboration with independent curator Alexandra Schwartz. The origin story of the show began with Schwartz researching in the Aldrich's archive and noting how scarce the documentation of the original show was. While there was a catalogue for Lippard's exhibition, only a few of the original works were reproduced alongside installation shots and there was no extant checklist.¹ Smith-Stewart had previously had a similar conversation with Jackie Winsor, an artist featured in Lippard's 'Twenty Six', while working on Winsor's monographic show at the Aldrich in October 2014 – April 2015. This led to the idea of an anniversary tribute to Lippard's 1971 effort, bringing the curatorial endeavour into the twenty-first century with a more diverse (in all aspects) range of artists and practices. Where Lippard's title avoided the word *feminism*, the new exhibition was titled '52 Artists', leaving *feminist* for the subtitle. The curators have acknowledged that the omission of 'feminist' as a qualifier for the artists was done in tribute to bell hooks's theory that feminism is for everyone, not just for women.² Indeed, in Lippard's 1971 show there were only cisgendered women exhibitors, which was intentionally not the case for '52 Artists'.

¹ See Alexandra Schwartz, "'Women's Lib Art Show': Lucy R Lippard and the Birth of the Feminist Exhibition', in *52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone*, exhibition catalogue, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum and Gregory R Miller & Co, Ridgefield, Connecticut and New York, 2022, p 29

² Amy Smith-Stewart discussed the title in an event associated with the exhibition; see '52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone with Curators Amy Smith-Stewart and Alexandra Schwartz', on The Aldrich Museum website <https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/52-artists-revisiting-a-feminist-milestone#related-public-programs-49>

Lippard's 1971 exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue with a seal that needed to be broken to open the publication. The designer Susana Torre, a friend of Lippard's, likened this to breaking a hymen, in true 1970s spirit. Smith-Stewart and Schwartz researched the original show by doing archival work using the black and white installation photographs. They have likened this to detective work as they tried to determine which works were attributed to specific artists and then attempt to trace them for the 2022–2023 iteration. As Schwartz writes in the catalogue, many of these works were lost, forgotten or simply destroyed.³ As one might expect, some artists have gone on to become prominent in the artworld, while others have become more obscure. Alice Aycock, Mary Heilmann, Mary Miss, Howarda Pindell, Adrian Piper and Sylvia Plimack Mangold, for example, were still not widely known in 1971, but today they are considered pioneers and are familiar to most art audiences. Others in the original exhibition have slipped into obscurity. Only twenty-three of the original twenty-six practitioners were represented in '52 Artists': two were unable to be located, and one artist decided that her work had gone in a very different direction and thus did not want to be included.⁴ Some artists showed their original pieces from 'Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists' while others did not have access to those works. Also, many of the second-wave feminist artists displayed both recent as well as historical work in the new exhibition. This, as well as the introduction of twenty-six emerging artists, puts '52 Artists' in a category of its own: rather than a direct recreation of an earlier exhibition, it synthesised Lippard's ideas and moved the concept into the future, one in which an expanded feminism includes more diversity and intersectionality.

The recreation of landmark historical exhibitions is something of a recent curatorial trend. In 2013, the Prada Foundation mounted the



'Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists', installation view with work by Merrill Wagner (centre), Jackie Winsor (on the floor, right), Paula Tavins (on the wall, right), and an unknown artist (left), The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, 18 April – 13 June 1971, image courtesy of Lucy Lippard Women's Art Registry, Special Collections and University Archives, Rutgers University Libraries

³ See Schwartz, "'Women's Lib Art Show'", op cit, p 37

⁴ See 'Adrian Piper, *Whistleblower Catalysis* 1971/2022' on The Aldrich Museum website: <https://thealdrich.org/exhibitions/52-artists-revisiting-a-feminist-milestone#adrian-piper-whistleblower-catalysis-oneninesevenonetwozerotwotwo-57>

ambitious restaging of Harald Szeemann's seminal 'When Attitudes Become Form' from 1969, which solidified conceptual and dematerialised art to a European audience. The 2013 exhibition in Venice saw a 1:1 scale recreation of the architecture of the Bern Kunsthalle in the Ca' Corner Della Regina palazzo. In 'Other Primary Structures' in 2014, New York's Jewish Museum restaged its historic 1966 exhibition 'Primary Structures: Younger American and British Sculptors', one of the first major museum exhibitions of Minimal Art in the US, curated by Kynaston McShine. The twenty-first century version paired works from the original exhibition with additional artworks by artists working in a similar vein, mostly from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, who were not included in the 1966 exhibition. As early as 2005, Marina Abramovic presented *Seven Easy Pieces*, a seven-night series where she restaged performances by Bruce Nauman, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, VALIE EXPORT, Joseph Beuys and herself at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Although not branded as a feminist artist, Abramovic's impulse to revisit many of these canonical performances and interpret them through her own body may be read as a feminist gesture.

'52 Artists' can be seen in relation to this milieu of iconic historical curating efforts; rather than a rigid retrospective examination and restaging of the original show, the curators re-envisioned it for 2022, including the twenty-six emerging feminist artists who contextualise feminist practice today. One notable feature of the show, and in contemporary feminism overall, was the plurality of voices represented in the new crop of artists selected for this show. Artists from diverse backgrounds, gender identities and sexual orientation were naturally included. It is, in fact, another in the list of curatorial efforts that Smith-Stewart has brought to the museum, including solo exhibitions of Jackie Winsor (as mentioned above), Harmony Hammond (2019), Genesis Belanger (2020) and Karla Knight (2021), among others. This is indicative of how far the artworld has transformed in the preceding decades: solo shows of women artists are no longer anomalous in today's institutional artworld.

The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art is located in Ridgefield, Connecticut, an affluent suburb of New York City, and not really a location where one would expect to find radical curation, political activism or cutting-edge art. A small and wholesome town, its inhabitants, however, have included illustrious figures such as Maurice Sendak, John F Kennedy and Judy Collins, to name only a few. Situated in the town centre, just a short walk from some twee shops nestled inbetween elegant cafes, the museum was founded in 1964 by Larry Aldrich, a successful fashion designer who was also an avid art collector. Aldrich sited the museum in an eighteenth-century house called the 'Old Hundred' building, which he was passionate about as he preferred showing art to the public in an intimate, domestic environment.⁵ The Aldrich is a non-collecting museum, which would typically be called a *kunsthalle* in parts of Europe.

⁵ Aldrich had also founded the SoHo Center for Visual Arts, which existed in New York City until 1990; see 'The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum/About' (<https://thealdrich.org/about>) for more information on the original house and Aldrich. For an excerpt of Larry Aldrich's oral history, see 'Oral history interview with Larry Aldrich, 1972 April 25–June 10', on the

Apparently, in the 1970s, the museum founder was not enthusiastic when the then Director, Dorothy Mayhall, invited Lucy Lippard to curate a show of women artists, but the idea went forward nevertheless. ‘Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists’ opened at the museum in April 1971 when the exhibition space was still located in the Old Hundred house, now used as office space for the institution. Since 2004 the museum has inhabited a 17,000 square foot facility with expanded gallery space, and is thus more amenable to hosting ambitious exhibitions. The premise of ‘Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists’ worked well within The Aldrich’s legacy of exhibiting unrepresented artists: Lippard focused on women artists who had not yet had a solo exhibition. In the catalogue for ‘52 Artists’ she writes:

At the time, so few women were being shown in galleries (forget museums) that it was a real dilemma to narrow down the selection from all the artists I was coming to know and work with in feminist groups in New York City who had not yet had a solo show there. I had a field day going to around 100 studios – an education that in itself fueled a decade of my writing and activism.⁶

Indeed, Lippard’s prolific curatorial and writing output offers a feminist legacy for generations to come and is foundational to feminist research for several decades; however, as she freely admits, there were glaring blind spots to second-wave feminist curatorial practice. Lippard acknowledges that in her original exhibition there ‘were a few African American artists but no Latinx, Asian, or Indigenous women. Nor were sexual preference and identity an issue. The new iteration, far more inclusive, is an antidote to my then-ignorance, in tune with the times.’⁷

The later exhibition layout mixed cohorts of artists, thus creating an intergenerational dialogue between different works. In addition, some pieces were recreated or even created for the first time. The very first exhibition in the museum’s history to cover the entirety of the expanded space, the show sprawled across two floors as well as the outdoor terrace and sculpture garden. It was the type of exhibition that requires more than one visit to digest it, and it still felt exhilarating on the second or third visit. There were a great number of artworks included, and encountering them in juxtaposition brought new insights into both historical and contemporary practice. ‘Twenty Six Contemporary Women Artists’ focused, unsurprisingly for Lippard, primarily on abstract sculpture and painting with a few exceptions. ‘52 Artists’ featured abstract sculptures and paintings but also included artworks typical of the expansion of new media in the past five decades. Video, performance, sound and installation, as well as an interactive work (by Aliza Schvartz), were

Smithsonian Archives of American Art website <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-larry-aldrich-12596>.

⁶ Lucy Lippard, ‘Backwards/Forwards’, in *52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone*, op cit, p 11

⁷ Ibid, p 12

featured, as well as a robust schedule of events – from feminist poetry readings and a dance performance to several panel discussions. A well-documented publication was published to accompany the exhibition, with essays by Lippard, Smith-Stewart and Schwartz, and has more the presence of a book than an exhibition catalogue. In the publication, Smith-Stewart organises the show into the following themes: ‘Abstraction Is Political and Sentient’, ‘Figuration Is Representation’, ‘Autobiography Is History’, ‘Citation Is Activism’, ‘Future Monuments and Liminal Strength’ and ‘Embodying Objects’.⁸ Many of the works in the exhibition embody more than one of these categories, reflecting a microcosm of intersectionality within many of the artworks.



Adrian Piper, *Whistleblower Catalysis*, 1971/2022, documentation of the group performance at the opening of ‘52 Artists: A Feminist Milestone’, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, image courtesy of the Adrian Piper Research Archive (APRA) Foundation Berlin, photo by Gloria Pérez

‘52 Artists’ opened on the fifty-first anniversary of Lippard’s original show.⁹ Visitors encountered two works before even entering the museum. *Whistleblower Catalysis* 1971/2022 was a restaging of a performance in which Adrian Piper played with a whistling device in a typically disruptive manner. Reactivated by six performers who dispersed throughout the visitors, the whistles were never removed from their mouths, which meant that with every exhale the performers created a high-pitched wheezing sound that never abated. This was an annoyance, and many did not realise that it was an artwork as the performers intentionally dressed to blend in with other guests. Eventually, when the whistling continued throughout the speeches given by Cybele Maylone, the Aldrich’s

⁸ See Amy Smith-Stewart, ‘Twenty-First Century Feminist Expressions’, in *52 Artists: a Feminist Milestone*, op cit, pp 91–98

⁹ The show had been planned to open on the fiftieth anniversary but due to Covid-19 lockdowns it was delayed for a year

Director, as well as Smith-Stewart and Schwartz, it became clear that it was an action meant to permeate the event. The constant shrill sound occupied the space, forcing itself into and around each visitor's consciousness, an apt metaphor for second-wave feminism itself, which was often considered a squeaky wheel in the artworld. As Lippard reminds us in her recent essay, feminist artists were rarely shown in galleries or museums in the 1970s. In 2022/23, after the MeToo movement and a sea change in the artworld, women artists are now even fashionable and occupy a much bigger chunk of the contemporary art ecosystem. However, as we know, they still do not demand the same market prices as their male counterparts and are underrepresented in the annals of art history. As artist Florencia Escudero says, 'I think there's a confusing split between knowing that so many advancements have been made and thinking that opportunities for women are no longer necessary and, on the other hand, the reality that gender equity is very far away in the art world'.¹⁰



Cecile Abish, *4 into 3*, 1973/2022, excavations: 20 cm deep, heaps: 30 cm high, 122 x 1143 cm overall, The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, courtesy of the artist, photo by Jason Mandella

Three outdoor pieces were exciting preludes to the exhibition indoors. Cecile Abish (who was born in 1930) showed *4 into 3*, 1973/2022, a large earthwork on the museum's lawn, where four shallow squares of grass and earth were removed from the ground and left in three piles of dirt laid

¹⁰ Smith-Stewart, 'Twenty-First Century Feminist Expressions', op cit, p 90

inbetween the excavated areas. It is well documented that Land Art was a post-war movement dominated by white, male artists, and this was an excellent example of historical recovery of a much-overlooked artist who worked in this milieu but who has largely been left out of its history. Monumental in scale, *4into3* was similar to the artist's original contribution to the 1971 show, a seventy-five-foot-long installation made of paper that decomposed in the elements.¹¹

Untitled Cyclone, 2017, by Alice Aycock, is similarly monumental in scale, constructed of aluminium, and likewise was sited in the garden of the museum. Catalina Ouyang's *Recourse*, 2021, was also placed outdoors, in this instance on the front terrace of the Aldrich. In this sculptural installation, a central figure takes the form of a blue mythological creature resembling a female Pegasus that is draped over the open escape hatch of a bus. Behind this are hundreds of arrows as if the figure was killed in battle. The works by Piper, Abish and Ouyang set the tone that continued in the galleries inside: an ambitious intertwining of artists of different generations and cultures, works of vastly different materials and a dialogue between formalist abstraction and figuration. The work outside had more than ample space, but once inside the density of artworks increased. There is not enough space here to discuss each work individually but an overall feel of the show can, I hope, be ascertained.



Alice Aycock, *Untitled Cyclone*, 2017, aluminum, 267 x 297 x 312.5 cm, installed at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, Connecticut, courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York, photo by Jason Mandella

¹¹ Schwartz, op cit, p 31

‘The Personal is Political’ is a slogan that heralded second-wave feminism and may be understood as an underlying theme of this show. Upon entering the Aldrich, a large-scale sculpture by Ugandan artist Leilah Babirye dominated the foyer. Babirye, who was forced to flee Kampala because of laws that persecute same-sex relationships, was granted asylum in the US and has become a fixture in the international art scene for work that combines found objects, ceramics and detritus she finds on the streets. The pejorative word for a gay person in her native language, ‘*ebisiyaga*’, means sugarcane husk, a worthless part of that plant. In *Ndibasa Namutebi from the Kuchu Mamba (Lungfish) Clan*, 2022, the artist used wood, wax and bicycle tyre inner tubes to create a majestic figure in the double-height museum space. The work was placed in dialogue with a polyurethane sculpture by Grace Bakst Wapner, *17 lbs 80z*, from 1968, that was situated near a window at the end of the foyer. This sculpture is typical of its era, which saw artists embracing new mediums such as polyurethane, a presence throughout the original exhibition. In her sculpture, Bakst Wapner conjured geological forms with an initially soft material, which also reflected the museum garden outdoors.

The interchange between abstraction and figuration that flowed throughout the exhibition was set in this entrance. Overtly figurative works flanked the sculptures in the Aldrich foyer. *Untitled*, 1970, is an oil-on-canvas painting by Cynthia Carlson, one of only three figurative painters included in the 1971 show. In the painting, three fork-like utensils spread open what looks like an oculus. This can also be interpreted as a speculum opening a cervix, again redolent of the 1970s preoccupation with vaginal imagery. Opposite, Loie Hollowell’s *Empty Belly*, 2021, reflected the bodily theme, including lactating breasts atop a circular, central womb area. It is worth noting that Hollowell’s incendiary artworld success is in great contradistinction to Carlson’s and is paradigmatic of the change in the reception of and market for women’s art. Flanking both Hollowell and Carlson’s paintings were small ceramic sculptures by Emilie L Gossiaux from her *E.L.G. Familial Archives* series from 2020. In these modest works, parts are metonymic of female bodies, constructed by memory from an artist who lost her sight in a tragic accident in 2010. In each limb the artist incises a drawing that resembles a tattoo.

The display of figuration continued in the front ground floor gallery, where Susan Hall’s *The Ornithologist* 1971 commanded the room like a guest at the head of a table. In this work, a woman in a sheer dress is surrounded by the birds referenced in the title. The entirety of the painting has an overlay pattern akin to tiles, echoing some of the geometric grids that featured in some of the historical works upstairs. Alongside Hall’s painting, recent paintings by Anna Park, Astrid Terrazas and Maryam Hoseini explore the inbetween of abstraction and figuration and the works are similarly large in scale, giving evidence to contemporary women’s dominance in a medium that for a long time was seen as male territory. Erin M Riley’s *Webcam 2*, 2020, made for an interesting juxtaposition in this gallery. Typical of Riley’s practice, this is a large wool and cotton

tapestry that depicts a woman masturbating and who is reflected both on a laptop and in a mirror in the back of the composition. A wry nod to Velazquez, Riley seems to project herself into the role of the woman and reminds us all that sex work, castigated by many, is a necessary occupation in the late capitalist digital age, where many teachers and artists utilise Only Fans pages to supplement their incomes. It is also a glorious image of powerful female onanism, a subject much obscured in art history. Similar to the interface of the two- and three-dimensional work in the foyer, there was a large abstract sculpture resembling a chandelier with dysmorphic body parts by Hannah Levy made of steel and silicone that commanded a presence in this room by reflecting the tension between the organic and the inorganic throughout the show. In a large upstairs gallery the pull and push between abstraction and figuration was further examined. Mary Heilmann's *Malibu*, 1970, a beautifully minimal blue-toned painting in acrylic gel on unstretched canvas, was hung alongside Sylvia Plimack Mangold's *Floor Corner*, 1969, a realistic depiction of the corner of a room and its wooden floor in a meta moment. In the middle of this room a large Alice Aycock floor sculpture, *Clay #2*, 1971, had been reconstructed that mimicked the abstract patterns of the works nearby, including a large photographic grid. Nearby, in another large gallery upstairs, Howardena Pindell's *Untitled*, 1968–1970, an original work from 'Twenty Six Contemporary Artists', was juxtaposed with a recent work of the artist's, *Carnival: Bahia, Brazil* from 2017. While both are abstract and wall-based, the earlier work, composed of a loose grid of soft material that spills from the wall to the floor, was the stronger presence and echoed the grid patterns in Jackie Winsor's floor sculpture *Brick*



Tourmaline, *Coral Hairstreak*, 2020, dye sublimation print, 75 × 76 cm, edition #2 of 3 plus 2 artist's proofs, collection of Richard Gerrig and Timothy Peterson, photo by Jason Mandella

Square from 1971. Like many of its neighbours within the exhibition, Pindell's *Untitled*, from over five decades ago, is astounding for its relevance today. Abstraction as a political action, as well as a Minimalist approach to artmaking by women artists, have long been overdue for a reappraisal.

In the adjacent galleries, fresh themes of migration and identity took centre stage. Tourmaline's *Coral Hairstreak*, 2020, is one in a series of colour photographs relating to her 16 mm film *Salacia* from 2020. In this image, the artist depicts herself in a space-age costume standing at the edge of a dry cornfield. The artist celebrates

Black, queer identity and envisions a more equitable future. Similarly, Alanna Fields uses found photographs of Black queer people that she obtains in flea markets as well as online. *Come to My Garden*, 2021, centres around a photograph from her archive that is digitally manipulated and enlarged. Smith-Stewart writes eloquently that the artist ‘coats the surface in strokes of pigmented hot wax, both cloaking and accentuating her subjects, to interrogate a persistent history of erasure and suppression’.¹² It is poignant to realise through ‘52 Artists’ that erasure happened within feminism itself, by second-wave curators and writers who primarily focused on the white, middle class experience.



Alanna Fields, *Come to My Garden*, 2021, pigment print mounted on museum board, encaustic on panel, 101.5 x 127 cm, courtesy of the artist, photo by Jason Mandella

Susan Chen’s *An Afternoon Making Quaranzines with Apex for Youth*, 2022, is a large painting that depicts a group of Asian women and was inspired by her volunteer efforts at an organisation based in New York’s Chinatown. Chen invited teenagers and mentors from Apex to her studio and painted each individually, synthesising the portraits into one large painting.¹³ Juxtaposed with Chen’s painting was a sculpture and animation by Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski: *The Girl Has Teeth and Teeth Are Tired*, 2022, is aligned with the artist’s abiding interest in creating a personal lexicon

¹² Smith-Stewart, ‘Twenty-First Century Feminist Expressions’, op cit, p 96

¹³ See ibid, p 93

of mythological figures that draw on her Puerto Rican American heritage. In this case, a small, patterned ceramic figure is adorned with ponytails of synthetic hair and bones, embodying both the simplicity of form in a pre-Columbian figure as well as a mystical future.

It is remarkable to know that all of the recent artworks for '52 Artists' were created during the Covid-19 pandemic. The world has recently come out of more than two years of isolation, and in some cases two years of art production inspired by this collective trauma. This exhibition was a beautiful metaphor for the dialogue and camaraderie that many creatives have missed. It is also important as a marker of time: Covid-19 came on the heels of the groundswell of the MeToo movement, and in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic Black Lives Matter gained popular traction and support in the US and beyond. This exhibition reflected a new, expanded consciousness that acknowledges a plurality of voices and positions. Lesbian, trans, gay or straight, feminism has been an abiding ideology for each of these artists and continues to remind us that oppression of anyone is not acceptable. Indeed, what was most inspiring about '52 Artists' has been the recollection of a recent history where feminism was not an inclusive movement. In the fifty years since Lippard's show, institutions such as the Aldrich have evolved, opening up visitors to new and at times challenging practices. The recognition of so many new voices that were exhibited, and the multifarious issues that are represented in their work, is an achievement for this small museum as well as for art practice in general. The widening of the playing field is a long-awaited major development for feminism in both institutional practice as well as public debate.

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