

*The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s*  
Hamburger Kunsthalle 13 March – 31 May

Since 2004, guided by curator Gabriele Schor, the Verbund energy company in Vienna has focused primarily on buying and showing photographic works by feminist artists from the 1970s. This is a laudable enterprise, though not necessarily free of subtext. One might circumspectly see budgeting for small black-and-white photographs by women as a way to acquire a large yet focused collection without too much expense, since such works come to market far more cheaply than, say, big bright abstract paintings by men. The symbolic gender redress, one would think, can meanwhile only be good for one's corporate image: not least in Austria, a country recently estimated as having one of Europe's largest pay gaps between men and women. That said, the artworld – the one in which MOMA still only devotes about four percent of its permanent display space to women artists – is full of such wiggles; very little art collecting or exhibiting has spotlessly clean hands, and mostly the Verbund collection is a circulating force of good in the world, as demonstrated by this juggernaut touring show.

In Hamburg, some 150 works by approximately 30 artists trace the development during the 1970s, in Europe, the US and Latin America, of alternative images of women as opposed to those previously constructed by men – an occurrence aided by the fact that in the postwar period, increasing numbers of women had

the opportunity to go to art school, and of course by the rise of the civil rights movement and the women's movement. Naturally Cindy Sherman's immortal *Untitled Film Stills* (1977–80) and related, lesser-known works are present and correct, as are Ana Mendieta's famous 1972 photographs of her face distortedly pressed against glass, an idea reprised four years later by Birgit Jürgenssen's text-scrawled photograph *Ich möchte hier raus!* ('I want to get out of here!'). Here too are VALIE EXPORT's mid-70s photo-performative images of her fitting compliantly into various urban spaces, Hannah Wilke's gum-speckled nude self-portraits and videos of herself undressing behind Duchamp's *The Large Glass* (1915–23), the violent acting-out of Martha Rosler's upending 1975 cooking-demonstration video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (memorable use of a nutcracker) and a substantial representation of Francesca Woodman's spooked self-portrait photography – the focus on video, performance and photography reflecting the fact that these media were considered less tainted by male art history.

*The Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s*, a version of which began touring in 2010, perhaps inevitably overlaps with MOCA's 2007 museum survey *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, and it's interesting to note what's happened in the intervening years. Several of the artists in both shows, like Nil Yalter, Suzy Lake and Lynn

Hershman Leeson – the latter's 1974–8 works exploring her alternative identity 'Roberta Breitmore', who to some extent existed in the real world (driver's license, credit card, etc), constituting a caustic highlight here – are now increasingly feted by the archive-trawling artworld. Whether this constitutes a triumph of feminism or of a ravenous market, though, is an open question. In the current exhibition, the curatorial net feels cast a little wider, and some individual achievements are levelled by context while others are elevated: projects like Lake's transformations into a pseudo-geisha, *Miss Chatelaine* (1973/98), Alexis Hunter's 1974 *Identity Crisis* photographs of herself as various 'types' and Eleanor Antin's gender-switching *Portrait of the King* (1972) in particular make Sherman's innovations less *sui generis* and illuminate a rich field of related operations. There are, elsewhere, instances of rhetorical bluntness that clearly responded to the urgency of the moment but haven't aged well: Penny Slinger's various photographs of herself dressed in a wedding-cake costume, Karin Mack's sequential images of herself ironing in which the ironing board becomes a funeral bier for her body. But the fact that a substantial amount of the remainder is intense, resonant, nuanced and important, yet still barely troubles the canons of art history, is – ironically – partly what sustains *The Feminist Avant-Garde's* mutual heartbeat. *Martin Herbert*



Birgit Jürgenssen, *Nest*, 1979, b/w photograph.  
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