



Yael Bartana, *Patriarchy is History* (2019).
Neon, 78 × 73 inches. Image courtesy
of the artist, Annet Gelink Gallery, and
Sommer Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv.
Photo: Tom Haartsen.

Time After Time

I am treacherous with old magic
and the noon's new fury
with all your wide futures
promised

Audre Lorde, "A Woman Speaks"¹

Like all other makers of good trouble, feminist artists have a lot on their plates. They grapple with a world designed to privilege white, cisgender, heterosexual men. They reckon with a history of feminist art whose declarations about female experience often confused an essentializing white heteronormativity with solidarity. Many imagine more hopeful and equitable futures that might repair the damage of their exclusion and wonder how their creative practices serve the communities in which they live. Given that feminist art is predicated on difference—and that its instantiations pledge no allegiance to any specific style, aren't bound by any single manifesto, and don't explore any one medium—when curating an exhibition of feminist work, it might be tempting to offer up examples of works that were made around the same time, label it feminist art, and call it a day.

Impressively, that's not what co-curators Connie Butler and Anne Ellegood (with curatorial assistance from Nika Chilewich) did for *Witch Hunt*, an ambitious exhibition presented jointly at the Hammer Museum and the Institute of Contemporary Art Los Angeles (ICA LA). Instead of blithely insisting that today's most poignant feminist art is being made in one place, or by a particular group of people resisting one political regime, the two assembled a global panorama of work that gave specificity to big concepts like

intersectional feminism and decolonization. *Witch Hunt's* 16 artists, in their reversals of crusty hierarchies, reimagining of art as a horizontal practice activated by research and community, and ridiculing of history's tendency to forget, proclaim that specificity is worth our time, and that giving others our time is a form of kinship that makes for a more just world.

In less nimble hands, a show largely comprised of a broad mix of principled video art, social practice, and quiet portraiture might read as plodding and time-consuming. But across eight galleries at the Hammer and six at the ICA LA, Butler and Ellegood found the fun, the awe, and the elegiac in both time-based media and objects whose profundity relies on time unfolding. And they figured out how to make all of this resonate between the two venues. Take the ironic theatricality of Candice Breitz's *TLDR* (2017), a cheeky musical projected as a video at the ICA LA that called attention to the narrowness of white celebrity feminists seeking to block the legalization of sex work. As Breitz's sex workers-turned-actors donned masks printed with the faces of Lena Dunham and Meryl Streep, I couldn't help but think back to Yael Bartana's video, *Two Minutes to Midnight* (2020) and guffaw. Installed at the Hammer, the new, video version of Bartana's *What if Women Ruled the World?* (2017) performances ambivalently answers its own question. Bartana convenes a group of feminist thinkers around the seriousness of a *Dr. Strangelove*-like roundtable studded with phallic objects (a cactus here, a banana there). Feminists, it turns out, can have excellent comedic timing.

Some objects inspired wonder because their makers seemed to have compressed the infinitude of time and space into the urgency of the here and now. At the Hammer, Otobong Nkanga's *Double Plot* (2018), an approximately 8-by-25-foot tapestry, filled a gallery wall as it mapped out a luminous cosmos. Its Black, blue leaf-headed figure stood sentinel-like as threads of silver and copper charted a networked

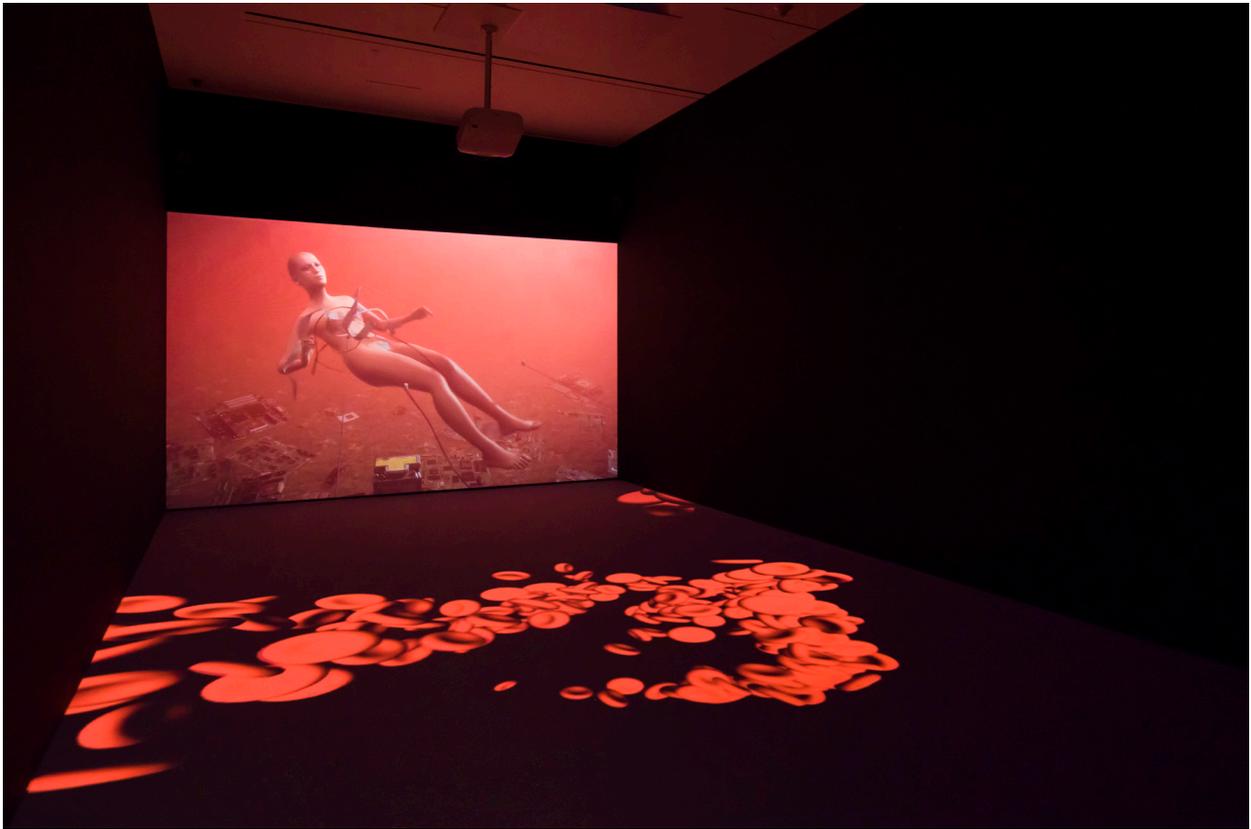
history of minerals, extraction, and labor, all against a black background bursting with the illusion of stardust. Nkanga's rhizomes spoke to Minerva Cuevas' reprisal of *Feast and Famine* (2015) at the ICA LA. Cuevas exhumed colonial histories of cacao through a billboard-style painting and collection of vitrines containing chocolate-covered objects, the drip-drip of chocolate that fell to the floor every six seconds matching the global rate of deaths from starvation leaving this visitor most haunted. There is wisdom in accounting for the pain of the past at scale.

Or, take the quiet wistfulness of Vaginal Davis' portraits at the ICA LA and Shu Lea Cheang's *UKI Virus Rising* (2018) at the Hammer. Built with antacid tablets, perfume, cocoa butter, and other materials on found paper (event flyers, business cards, etc.), Davis' small-scale portraits memorialized women whom patriarchal histories would leave unremembered—the installation an homage to her Black, Creole, lesbian mother. Cheang evoked a similar sense of the fleeting with her multi-channel video. One wall featured a video of a protean figure who shapeshifted, sometimes appearing androgynous and sometimes traditionally female, while navigating a motherboard wasteland. Another projection of blood platelets flooded the floor and ceiling, magnifying the microscopic parts that keep each of us alive. Here, the Taiwanese-American artist allegorized the technophilic capitalism that estranges women-identifying people from their bodies. Each artist presented alternative media for remembering: Davis' portraits were stubbornly analog and even ephemeral, Cheang's digital avatars had the clunkiness of CGI. But both artists practice systems-savvy and hopefulness, where the stuff of the past might not be condemned to melancholy but rather turned into possibility, and maybe even joy.

The two venues also conjured two complementary types of magic: process at the Hammer and historical revision at the ICA LA. In Westwood, Cheang's *UKI Virus*, Bartana's *Two Minutes*,

and Nkanga's cosmos made for easy companions to a new chapter of Laura Lima's *Alfaiataria (Tailor shop)* (2014/2021). As she had for the installations of the project at Maastricht's Bonnefantenmuseum and the Pinacoteca de São Paulo, for the duration of *Witch Hunt* Lima hired local tailors—here, Surjalo and Lily Abbitt—to work in the Hammer's galleries. The tailors created garments that were stretched onto wooden frames to make paintings that were then slotted into an open-storage system at the center of the installation. Lima simultaneously rooted her project in a local context (at the Hammer, with local labor, for *Witch Hunt*) and asserted its internationalism (through its connectedness to other iterations in the Netherlands and Brazil), and also invited viewers to see her installation as a set of elements in an ongoing, seven-year institutional critique. Such incompleteness syncopated eloquently with ICA LA's defenses against ossified histories. In addition to Davis' portraits and Cuevas' archaeology, Lara Schnitger's five stilted, 12-foot, nylon-stretched giants formed a parade of totemic, spiky, transgressing protestors. Each crystallized and then subverted associations with what Simone de Beauvoir famously called “the second sex.” At the ICA LA, *Anemic Royalty* (2021), a Birkenstock-clad behemoth wearing a pageant-like sash stamped with ancient spells, parodied women's historic roles as healers and poisoners; *Kolosoi* (2021), evoking the Louvre's famously cursed “doll” of the same name, donned a tie and so many banners to trouble the boots-on-the-ground, dictum-toting activist stereotype. Each of Schnitger's sculptures was a rebuke to the sometimes millennia-old myths that threaten every woman's self-determination. With the unique focus of each venue, together the works formed a cohesive reminder that process is a kind of historical revision; that historical revision is itself a process.

Perhaps in light of this, endurance became another central theme across



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Top: Shu Lea Cheang, *UKI Virus Rising* (installation view) (2018). Three-channel digital video, color, and sound, 10 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist and DICRÉAM, le Centre national du cinéma, France. Photo: Jeff McLane.

Bottom: Laura Lima, *Alfaiaataria (Tailor shop)* (installation view) (2014/2021). Mixed-media installation. Image courtesy of the artist; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, Los Angeles and New York; A Gentil Carioca, Rio de Janeiro; and Luisa Strina Gallery, Sao Paulo. Photo: Jeff McLane.

both venues. By giving each artist or pair of artists a gallery of their own, the curators asked audiences to witness the flourishing of creative practices by people who are often overlooked: middle-aged, women-identifying artists of color. They tacitly asked visitors to consider the energy it has taken for women artists—trans, cisgender, Black, Brown, queer, among other categories of historic marginalization—to create in a world that has only begun to provide women with as many resources as are predisposed for white, cisgender, heterosexual men. As a curatorial project, *Witch Hunt* suggests histories-in-the-making rather than pointing to those that are finite and settled.

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Surprisingly, for a city so often eager to forget its past, over the last 15 years, the curation of feminist art in Los Angeles museums has largely been a historiographical enterprise. MOCA's 2007 *WACK!*, also organized by Butler, had a searing impact as the first survey of global feminism from 1965 to 1980. The exhibit evidenced a history of transformational feminist art that an increasingly monetized and insistently white male-dominated art world ignored at its peril.² For the first edition of *Pacific Standard Time* (PST) in 2011, Ben Maltz Gallery at Otis College hosted *Doin' it in Public*, for which Meg Linton and Sue Maberry recuperated the vibrant goings-on of the Los Angeles Woman's Building (1973–1991). In 2017, the Hammer traveled south for the Getty's second edition of *PST*, with *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985*, curated by Cecilia Fajardo-Hill, Andrea Giunta, and Marcela Guerrero, with Butler's support. The show exemplified an unapologetically intersectional feminist cultural production that, thanks to the global amplification of Black Lives Matter, has become au courant for L.A. curatorial practice.

When times change but social structures don't, feminist artists make

all the more obvious how the past can shape our present. *Witch Hunt*, built from the legacy of the aforementioned exhibitions, was a timely rejoinder to the particular traumas of the Trump presidency. 45's flagrant, trigger-happy sexism was too loud to ignore. Hence the brilliant irony of the curators' title. In just two words, Butler and Ellegood summoned a genealogy of white, American patriarchy that runs from the pre-revolutionary Salem witch trials to the false construction of victimhood with which Trump fear-mongered and angered his base.³ Of course, the loser of the 2020 U.S. presidential election was—and continues to be—a symptom of misogyny, not its singular agent. And *Witch Hunt* demonstrated the bittersweet paradox that feminism—especially when put into practice by feminist artists—remains vital because the equity it seeks has yet to be achieved.

Equity is hard to win when contemporary hand-wringing comes at the expense of reflexive contemplation and historical specificity. Layers of historical struggle came alive in *Poor People's TV Room Solo* (2014/2021), for which Okwui Okpokwasili constructed a translucent plastic box in which an upright, raffia-wrapped automaton rotated; onto which a silhouette of the artist's moving body was projected; and alongside which played a video of Nigerian women dancing, singing, and community-making. Invoking the legacy of the 1929 Women's War, Okpokwasili's multi-sensory installation privileged the bodies of the female African diaspora over and against the denigrations of white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy. The work's attention to a long, complex, global resistance challenged the flash-in-the-pan feminist catchphrases that populate our media: the hot pink pussy hats that were knitted for the 2017 Women's March (and then discarded), the virtue-signaling of corporate statements of solidarity, even feminism-forward nonprofits that are attempting to repair inequality with the same old tools (RIP Time's Up 1.0).⁴



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Top: Every Ocean Hughes, *One Big Bag* (video still) (2021). Single-channel video projection with color and sound, 38 minutes. Image courtesy of the artist.

Bottom: Minerva Cuevas, *Feast and Famine* (installation view) (2015). Mixed-media installation, dimensions variable. Image courtesy of the artist and kurimanzutto, Mexico City / New York. Photo: Jeff McLane/ICA LA.

Witch Hunt's legacy, then, may very well rest in its argument for perseverance. For, yes, it is progress that the current American vice president is a Black, South Asian, cisgender woman. But it's not enough. At the Hammer, the cold air blasting out of Teresa Margolles' wall of evaporative coolers—called *El agua del Río Bravo* (2021) because the machines, which were bought in the Mercado Los Herrajeros in Ciudad Juárez, are filled with water from the Río Bravo (what Americans call the Rio Grande)—memorialized the transmigrants among the waves of asylum-seekers whom Vice President Harris bluntly told, “Do not come.”⁵ Or, take Every Ocean Hughes' *One Big Bag* (2021), a video in which performer Lindsay Rico navigates a loose curtain of seemingly everyday objects (a compact of concealer, a bottle of Advil). Each object becomes a talisman when Rico describes how it augments the toolkits that death doulas minister for the recently deceased. Hughes' long-researched notion of “queer death”—which foregrounds care in mutual aid, chosen family, and self-determination—rings poignantly amid a pandemic that has exposed a healthcare system designed to disregard the pain of Black and Brown women.

Witch Hunt's artists penetrate the noise of contemporary discourse because their work reverberates with transformation. Whether in the incantatory songs of the Nigerian women featured in Okpokwasili's *TV Room* or Davis' quiet monuments made from fugitive materials, these artists take measure of the world as it was; pose questions about how we want to spend our time; and provide concepts, materials, and know-how to move the world beyond what it is. It's tempting to say that Bartana's declarative neon sculpture, *Patriarchy Is History* (2020), displayed to introduce *Two Minutes* at the Hammer, had the exhibition's final word. But Butler and Ellegood's canny grouping of so many potent examples of feminist art materialized

an important extension of Bartana's statement: that feminisms are the future.

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1. Audre Lorde, “A Woman Speaks,” 1997, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42583/a-woman-speaks>. Accessed 6 November 2021.

2. Holland Cotter, “The Art of Feminism as It First Took Shape,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/arts/design/09wack.html>.

3. Analyses of Trump's use of the term have largely described the former president's twisted use—i.e. that a phrase once used to describe the mass capture and execution of white women in early modern Europe and the American colonies is now describing the fear of white, cisgender, heterosexual men who have long been in power as they see their power shrinking. See: Anne Ellegood, “Visibility and Vulnerability,” *Witch Hunt* (Los Angeles: The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, Inc., 2021): 117–121; Christopher Knight, “Review: Ex-President Trump claims to be a witch hunt target. These feminists beg to differ,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 10, 2021. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-11-10/witch-hunt-hammer-ica>. I think there's an additional feature of the inversion worth appreciating: Trump can only safely use this phrase because he is assured American culture will never see him as something so weak as a woman, much less a Black or Brown, trans or queer woman.

4. Jodi Kantor, Arya Sundaram, Melena Ryzik, and Cara Buckley, “Turmoil Was Brewing at Time's Up Long Before Cuomo,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/21/us/times-up-metoo-sexual-harassment.html>.

5. Jean Guerrero, “Op-Ed: What Kamala Harris' callous message to migrants really means,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 9, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-06-09/kamala-harris-mexico-guatemala-migrants>. See also: Nick Miroff, “Biden administration says it's ready to restore 'remain in Mexico' policy along border next month,” *Texas Tribune*, October 15, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/10/15/remain-in-mexico-migrant-protocols-biden-border/>.