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**Danger! Women Reading:
Feminist encounters with art, history and theory.**

Introduction

Victoria Horne, Northumbria University

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Victoria Horne, Northumbria University

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Catherine Spencer, University of St Andrews

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Danger! Women Reading: Feminist encounters with art, history and theory.

The popular fear of what a reader might do among the pages of a book is like the ageless fear men have of what women might do in the secret places of their body, and of what witches and alchemists might do in the dark behind locked doors.

(Manguel 1996: 21)

What does it mean to read dangerously? This special issue suggests that dangerous reading is reading against the grain, it is anti-orthodox and therefore challenging to the status quo.¹ As Alberto Manguel suggests, in his lively survey *A History of Reading*, reading retains a powerful capacity to inspire fear. Knowledge, female sexuality and witchcraft are frequently interlaced in the historical imagination; while the privacy of the reader when absorbed in a text - materially present but psychically transported elsewhere - suggests the mysterious, uncontrollable reaches of the imagination and intellect. Manguel's evocative description pertinently associates the 'pages of a book' with the 'secret places' of women's bodies, as both are private spaces in which processes of sexual and social reproduction take place. Books are a site for the social production of knowledge and, although reading can be conformist, banal or routine, it's simultaneously laced with an alluring potential for disruption; it can be transformative to hegemonic knowledge and, not least, to one's own understanding. While art history is comprised of visual artefacts, it is also a history of its periodicals, libraries, and evolving reading cultures; consequently the feminist transformation of art history is incomprehensible without understanding the revolution in small-scale, non-commercial publishing precipitated by new reprographic technologies of the 1960s and '70s. This special issue therefore brings together six essays on the theme of women's reading in the context and aftermath of the women's liberation movement. By focussing on acts of reading, and associated activities including writing, studying, and looking, it is intended to provide a fresh, if somewhat oblique, perspective on the well-established story of feminism's intervention in art history.

Representing Reading

This special issue seeks to historicise and conceptualise the materials, and material practices, through which women readers have gathered to self-educate, discuss, and disseminate new perspectives on art and its history. In the past decade a substantial and energising field of scholarship has developed on the history of media technologies in relation to both feminism and art history. Kate Eichhorn (2014; 2016) has chronicled the role of zines and xerography in mediating activist movements, Gwen Allen (2011) has excavated the history of artists' magazines, and specific periodicals have been anthologised (Throp and Walsh 2014) or

¹ A special thanks to the Mitchell Street reading group, whose warmth, generosity and seemingly inexhaustible interest in all kinds of writing sparked my interest in thinking about reading and its social aspects.

digitised (British Library, n.d.). Scholarly, and more broadly cultural, attention to the ways in which books, magazines and other print ephemera mediate activist movements and their histories, has been markedly reenergised, including the sphere of contemporary art.

Sharon Hayes' five-channel video installation, *In my Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You* (2016), animates exchanges from the pages of feminist, lesbian and effeminate publications in the period 1955-1977. Thirteen readers recite fragments of these letters and editorials to camera, while select pages of the magazines are reproduced and pasted on boards in the exhibition space behind the screens. During a similar production period, as part of her project *To Become Two* (2014-17), artist Alex Martinis Roe created six films exploring the history of different feminist communities in the 1970s – communities that formed around reading, studying and publishing activities, such as the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, Psychanalyse et Politique or Women's Studies at Utrecht University. These high-profile film installation projects are instructive in that they point to a general tendency in contemporary feminist culture to trace, imagine, and perhaps momentarily inhabit, the contours of pre-digital reading communities.² While artists throughout history have demonstrated interests in text and print, from painterly representations of absorbed readers to Cubism's early experiments with newspaper collage or conceptualism's bookworks, today's iterations are distinct in their meditative focus on the political and social characteristics of particular book and magazine readerships. These projects seek less to represent those particular histories than to enable audiences to experience the tactile pleasures and social connections forged by and through reading activities.

This tendency towards textual histories and activities is not limited to the sphere of feminism. It is evident in the proliferation of small-scale libraries and temporary reading rooms that now accompany any self-respecting contemporary art exhibition. We can see it in the numerous artists' zine projects and zine-building exercises used in gallery education and outreach. It has manifested in a recent spate of art exhibitions displaying avant-garde magazines including *Aspen*, *Bau Magazine*, *Make Magazine*, and *Studio International*, while eminent publications have stimulated the scholarly field (Allen 2011; 2016).³ Artistic and curatorial strategies have also been used to inventively illuminate, and enable viewers to experience, historical reading practices associated with particular libraries and bookshops.⁴ Accordingly, at the same time as online archives make vast amounts of print history exceptionally accessible via digital facsimile, print is proving to be a surprisingly resilient material. This may be attributable to the emotional resonance and imaginative appeal of printed ephemera. Scholars have pointed to the 'degraded look' (Gitelman 2014: 109) and anarchic

² It would seem that scholarly attention is turning to publishing and writing as spheres of potentially autonomous public discourse (Fraser 1990), following at least a decade subsequent to the widely heralded 'return of feminist art' during which the feminist critical gaze has been directed at the museum institution and its exhibition practices (Jones 2008; Robinson 2016; Dimitrakaki and Perry, 2015). A shift from public space to public speech.

³ *Aspen Magazine 1965-71*, ICA London: 11.09.2015 – 03.03.2016. *Everything is Architecture: Bau Magazine from the 60s to 70s*, ICA London: 29.07.2015 – 04.10.2015. *CAN DO: Photographs and Other Material from the Women's Art Library Magazine Archive*, Chelsea Space: 18.11.2015 – 18.12.2015. *Five Issues of Studio International*, Raven Row: 26.02.2015 – 03.05.2015.

⁴ *No Colour Bar: Black British Art in Action 1960-1990*, Guildhall Art Gallery: July 2015 – January 2016. 'Unsilencing the Library', Compton Verney Art Gallery and Park.

charm of such documents, with Eichhorn (2016) describing a ‘xerox effect’ in contemporary activism. It is unsurprising that such resilience is especially conspicuous in the sphere of contemporary art, where many obsolete forms of technology such as slide carousels and vintage television monitors also survive as aesthetic artefacts.

For what reasons are artists, historians and curators turning their attention to print media and publishing history? Nicholas Thoburn (2016: 4) cites N. Katherine Hayes to suggest that: ‘as print ceases to be the default medium of publication, “the assumptions, presuppositions, and practices associated with it are now becoming visible as media-specific practices rather than the largely invisible status quo.”’ According to Thoburn, newer modes of textual expression and **publication** such as email, blogs and social media have cast fresh light on previously dominant forms of communication and distribution that were masked by the very ubiquity of print. Consequently, and in conjunction with the past decade’s ideological and economic attacks on public libraries, society’s developing familiarity with digital formats is reviving and reshaping our relationship to printed materials in unexpectedly fresh ways. These artistic, curatorial and publishing ventures enrich our understanding of reading’s histories, allowing audiences to experience the shape and texture of these moments in often novel and inspiring ways. The feminist and/or queer milieus captured by Hayes’ and Roe’s films – those remembered or imagined exchanges fostered by alternative bookshops, small-scale periodical networks, grassroots libraries and self-directed reading groups – those durational interactions serve as an inspiring reminder to contemporary viewers. Such projects may be a means of establishing appreciative connections with the past, as feminist ‘fans’ (Grant 2011) or as part of paradigmatic ‘historiographic turn’ in the art field (Roelstraete 2009), as well as holding onto or reviving alternative modes of social interaction that counter the breakneck communicative pace of ‘24/7 Late Capitalism’ (Crary 2013).

[This rich nexus of readerly community, connection to the past, community driven impulses / forge connections / seems key, and the romantic lure of print cannot be discounted.] Drawing on Benedict Anderson, Natalie Thomlinson (2016: 434) has argued that black feminist periodicals provided their readership with access to an ‘imagined community’, enabling them to ‘become part of the women’s movement *through the act of reading*’. Comparably, engaging with these artworks or exhibitions about acts of reading, writing and learning enables viewers to temporarily inhabit those historic exchanges, while becoming part of a new imagined community of viewers; time and space enfolding across media networks. As scholars have noted, the cultural mediation of feminist activist histories is exceptionally marked at present (Chidgey 2018), therefore these artworks and activities provide creative ways into these political pasts. Feminist magazines, moreover, frequently resonate with discordance and refuse to mediate a tidy version of that past. As Victoria Bazin and Mel Waters have valuably articulated on the pages of this journal, attention to periodicals’ multivalent voices can disrupt calcified feminist histories: ‘Interpreting the histories of feminism through periodicals is not simply a form of archival excavation; it challenges the way in which we tell stories about feminist activism.’ (2016: 351)

The current yearning for slower, analogue modes of communication may be less positively understood as a nostalgic rather than reparative act. It is surely not coincidental that,

at the time of writing, the social media platform Instagram has 32.5 million posts under the popular hashtag #bookstagram and over 8.8 million tagged with #feminism. Growing by around one million posts a month, #bookstagramming is a significant cultural practice that curiously blends old and new media forms. Within a contemporary image culture, the trend for perfectly composed 'filtered' photographs of attractive books alongside flowers, coffees and cakes dramatically underscores the book's existence as commodity, as well as pointing towards the intellectual performativity of 2010s popular feminism. As Thorburn (2016: x) reminds his readers:

...we tend not to think of the capitalist form of books. We imagine books to be transcendent intellectual, moral, and aesthetic goods unsullied by commerce, just as we perceive our own individual encounters with these quintessential objects of culture to confirm and augment only our intellect, taste, or political commitments, the textual object greeting and flattering its reading subject *as if the two meet outside of social determination*. (Emphasis added)

It is impossible here to fully explicate the array of competing desires and conditions shaping subjects' relationships to the material and cultural practices of reading. Suffice to say the pressures are complex and tangled, with a blossoming of popular feminist publishing and a concerted drive in the contemporary artworld to explore late twentieth-century publishing practices, all occurring upon a capitalist cultural terrain in which feminist texts and artworks are themselves commodities. This snapshot of art exhibitions, publications, artworks and social media landscape evidences the extent to which 'reading is increasingly acknowledged to be an activity poised between an intensely private, inward experience, on the one hand, and, on the other, as inseparable from a social world.' (Flint 2006: 512) Indeed as Thorburn argues, reading practices are always, and somewhat invisibly, socially determined. I raise these intersecting points to emphasise the social, intellectual and individual attractions of, and pressures upon, reading as an educative political act. It is within this contemporary cultural climate we offer this collection of essays on feminist reading culture in twentieth-century art history.

Dangerous Readers

In women's history, literature has long been understood as 'a spur to collective action', consequently para-institutional reading groups have assumed an important function in women's collective organising (Long 2004). The sociologist Elizabeth Long (2004: 337) has studied women's book groups and found that, '[a]ccounts of early literary clubs often include evidence that male authorities, from pastors to husbands, perceived these activities as a threat to domestic order.' Like many activities associated with the so-called New Woman, literary groups found themselves the object of satire and ridicule; predictably, as women's reading and access to literature has been a site of persistent regulation and cultural anxiety. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries conduct books debated the morality and logistics of reading, with novel-reading emerging as a particularly dangerous recreation (Pearson 1999). '[Reading]

might increase female rationality, but at the same time it distracted women from their domestic duties and aroused transgressive, especially sexual, desires. What, when, and how women read thus became sites of political conflict and cultural surveillance.’ (Mellor 2000: 131) This can be observed in the history of visual art, particularly painting, where ‘given the limited access women have had to literacy historically, the woman reader is overrepresented’ (Fowler 2008: 13-14). The woman reader is a subversively contradictory figure in representation, expressing mental activity but physical idleness, pious improvement or independence of mind. As Kate Flint has argued (2006: 517) ‘the image of the woman reader makes the figure an ideal screen onto which all kinds of cultural assumptions may be projected.’

Although, as Flint (2006: 520) warns, women’s reading is not always nor even primarily a subversive act, the figure of the ‘resisting reader’ prevails, either as an object of anxiety for authorities, or as a gutsy heroine for women. In the 1970s feminists seized this position and cunningly gave their periodicals titles such as *Shrew*, *Red Rag* or *Heresies*. The title of this themed issue plays on the notion of the peripheral threat, particularly the idea of the ‘dangerous woman’ and of historical and mythological fears about women’s defeminising access to ‘dangerous knowledge’. It is necessary to note, however, that this claim to danger can usually be assumed only from a position of relative privilege and that many subjects, especially black women or trans women, may not feel as free to risk this association. However, while ‘reading tends to be collectively harnessed to social activism only under certain conditions’ (Long, 357), the essays gathered here demonstrate how, in the context and aftermath of the women’s liberation movement, reading was harnessed to intellectual activism in arts. Ultimately this publication addresses the ways in which women in the late-twentieth century came together around printed matter to organise, research, reproduce and distribute innovative knowledge about art, giving birth to feminist perspectives on art and art history.

Women’s reading has often been framed as frivolous and feminine against rational masculine comprehension, what and where women read has been firmly policed; yet, more promisingly, women’s reading may have come under persistent scrutiny because ‘it suggests the potential autonomy of her mind’ (Flint 2006: 517). At the time of collating this special issue I am struck by the tremendous success of HBO’s televisual adaptation of *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel imagines a dystopian future in which women have been reduced to their reproductive function and the intellectual activities of reading and writing are punishable by extreme violence. As Atwood knows, control of women’s sexuality and bodies goes hand in hand with control of text’s communicative and educative functions. During the past year, the red-and-white handmaiden outfits have emerged as an unexpected, but visually striking, protest symbol at women’s marches around the world. While this is most obviously prompted by governmental crackdowns on women’s reproductive rights, the remarkable levels of interest in the story suggest wider anxieties around gender, knowledge, communication, and education. That women comprise two-thirds of the world’s 750 million illiterate adults (UNESCO 2017), evidences that these are not only historic or fictional conflicts and serves as a reminder to cherish and defend current reading privileges.

While women’s participation in reading groups has clear historical motives, it is less clear why their involvement continues to outweigh that of men in the contemporary era. Long

(2004: 352) has suggested that women continue to form clubs in order to reflect, through literature, on pressing questions of identity and its social construction. Under current 'institutional and ideological circumstances, reading groups have continued to be particularly important for women because of their need to negotiate life choices and identities that are... both significantly more open and uncharted than in the past and yet are still not really well served by the major institutions of our social order.' In other words, reading offers a space for women to come together, to educate themselves, to think through the conditions of life – and, in these journal articles, we see how this plea to come together *as women* intersects with other markers of difference including sexuality, class and race. In addition to addressing the role of reading groups and publishing circles as systems of knowledge mediation in feminist art history, the contributors bring a range of expertise to framing and analysing the visual qualities of women's reading materials. For the recent spate of curatorial programmes and exhibitions reminds us that these printed materials, including periodicals, newsletters and short-run books, are decidedly visual artefacts that require dedicated analysis from visual cultural historians.

This collection of essays offers fresh perspectives on feminist cultural history by focussing on the revolutionary effect women's reading and self-education had on the practices of art-making, -historicising and -theorising in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It adds to existing scholarship by emphasising the ways in which women organised around, not only art studios and alternative exhibition sites, but self-published periodicals, newsletters, reading groups, independent slide libraries – a whole network of para-institutional textual practices that produced, mediated and disseminated feminist perspectives on art. The collection starts from this principle, with **Victoria Horne's** essay establishing the powerful ideological and practical effects of self-education in the feminist art, history and theory movement of the late twentieth century. Arguing for the importance of extra-institutional reading and study groups in the production of feminist perspectives on art history, Horne analyses the UK magazine *FAN: Feminist Arts News*, suggesting that it was a meaningful choice to dedicate the first issue to the topic of women's art education.

Refocussing attention to a different national context, **Catherine Spencer** examines the troubled visibility of feminist politics in art produced within the context of the French women's liberation movement. Spencer provides an agenda-setting history of the journal *Sorcières* (1976-82) and, through close analysis of imagery and layout, skilfully animates the discussions both explicit and implicit that occurred upon its pages. By foregrounding the markedly anxious relationships between reading and looking, women and feminism, art and politics, the example offered here provides perceptive instruction during an era in which these connections are too often reductively assumed. Despite the complex tensions between literature, art and politics in *Sorcières*, Spencer's article establishes the publication as 'a dynamic site for thinking through the relationship between art and feminism in France', as well as for consciousness-raising readerly experiences. **Amy Tobin's** contribution expands on the themes of collaboration and dispute by focussing on the New York-based journal, *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977-1992). Tracing its roots to the small group politics of women's liberation and the mimeograph revolution of the 1960s and '70s, Tobin explains the catalysing influence of these forces on collectively produced feminist magazines of the era. The editorial processes

of skill-sharing and collective production were notably labour intensive and generated fiery dissention as well as creative experimentation, which, Tobin asserts, was essential to interrogating and learning from difference rather than acceding to tokenism. As such, the magazine ‘staged some of the most difficult problems that faced feminism’ during this period.

While novels imply the enigmatic psychological world of the reading subject, and periodicals resonate with diverse, sometimes dissonant, voices of contributors, letters suggest more intimate social relations altogether. **Catherine Grant**’s essay explores three instances of public letter writing by queer feminists of colour and proposes that such practices are a vital mode of counterpublic discourse for subjects often rendered invisible in dominant art histories. Published in artists’ books or art magazines, these public epistles speak not only to the friends and loved ones directly addressed, but to dispersed and/or future readers, inviting affective reading exchanges through the familiarity of the letter form. **Laura Guy** also explores queer affective exchange but in the context of San Franciscan periodical, *On Our Backs* (1984-2006), an erotica magazine run by and for lesbians. Arguing that ‘photography was central’ to ‘generating a renewed lesbian culture in the 1980s’, Guy brings photographic theory of the period into conversation with periodical studies to demonstrate that ‘[l]ooking at pictures is not like reading other kinds of printed ephemera such as literature’ and that the community of contributors and readers (which often overlapped) had to toil towards generating an ‘erotic language for lesbian desire’. Guy’s essay vividly animates the magazine’s social milieu, even as she traces the discord and dissent generated by the so-called sex wars over pornography and censorship.

In the final essay, curator **Althea Greenan** reflexively performs the role of ‘dangerous reader’ in relation to the women’s slide library that she oversees at Goldsmiths, London. Resisting the often decontextualizing processes of digitisation, her creative readings ‘defamiliarise’ the slides by emphasising their material qualities and focussing attention on the mounts and textual inscriptions that frame the primary content. In doing so, Greenan reads between the lines of the archive for the peripheral traces of artistic and collaborative labours that created the conditions for the women’s slide collection. As periodical scholars have pointed out, the processes of digitising analogue materials have too often ‘left a hole in our print archives’, when seemingly insignificant paratextual details are left behind (Latham and Scholes 2006: 521). Greenan’s contribution is therefore a fitting conclusion to this special issue as she simultaneously describes and performs a re-reading of these materials thus providing one model for how to excavate, register and conceptualise their specific histories.

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