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Pratt Manhattan Gallery
New York City
September 28–November 23, 2016

Alisia Chase

This November, a woman from a major political party was on the American presidential ballot for the first time in history, and pundits predicted that the ultimate glass ceiling would finally shatter. In the words of this candidate's supporters, we would become a "pantsuit nation." During the several weeks prior to this unprecedented election, two news items featuring female protesters showed up in my Facebook feed. One occurred in Rhode Island, where more than three hundred women marched in solidarity for the right to wear yoga pants. The other culminated in Jerusalem, after more than 3,000 Israeli and Palestinian women marched for two weeks in solidarity for peace in the Middle East. The disparity between these two marches was so extreme I felt like I was being punked. A common slogan of second-wave feminists was "The personal is political!"—a catchphrase meant to underscore how a woman's daily life is shaped by the institutions that govern her, and I'm sure there must be a clever cultural theorist out there who could argue that wearing yoga pants is a step toward radicalization.

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EXHIBITION REVIEW

Feminism is Politics!

PRATT MANHATTAN GALLERY
NEW YORK CITY
SEPTEMBER 28–NOVEMBER 23, 2016

Installation view of The Unities (2012–present) by Anna Zvyagintseva; photograph by Anna Zvyagintseva

This November, a woman from a major political party was on the American presidential ballot for the first time in history, and pundits predicted that the ultimate glass ceiling would finally shatter. In the words of this candidate's supporters, we would become a "pantsuit nation." During the several weeks prior to this unprecedented election, two news items featuring female protesters showed up in my Facebook feed. One occurred in Rhode Island, where more than three hundred women marched in solidarity for the right to wear yoga pants. The other culminated in Jerusalem, after more than 3,000 Israeli and Palestinian women marched for two weeks in solidarity for peace in the Middle East. The disparity between these two marches was so extreme I felt like I was being punked. A common slogan of second-wave feminists was "The personal is political!"—a catchphrase meant to underscore how a woman's daily life is shaped by the institutions that govern her, and I'm sure there must be a clever cultural theorist out there who could argue that wearing yoga pants is a step toward radicalization. But all I could think was first-world privilege, indeed. Is this what American feminism has come to? So invested in the personal that the right to wear athleisure with impunity is one of the few things that gets women mobilized? As far as I can tell, women have been wearing jeans for more than a quarter of a century, but we're still making three-quarters of a man's dollar. As patriarchy has proved time and time again, wearing pants does not make one politically enlightened, nor a feminist.

Olga Kopenkina, curator of the thus timely exhibition *Feminism is Politics!* might argue that this is a perfect illustration of what American feminism has become—or at least the version of feminism that's visible in the media. As a depoliticized offshoot of the same neoliberalism that exonerates banks and corporations while shifting the blame and burden to the homeowners and the workers, what scholars now term "neoliberal feminism" abandons collective action and the commons for individual responsibility and the marketplace.[1] Not surprisingly, then, this feminism primarily benefits highly educated women who already have surplus capital. These are the women who can afford to "lean in," because a whole host of invisible and poorly paid laborers serve as the human scaffolding for their UGG and Starbucks-laden lives. Their artworld feminist darling is Cindy Sherman because her work affirms their struggles with fashion as a means to female identity. By contrast, the ten female artists—from ten different countries—*in Feminism is Politics!* look at the lives of those who are the scaffolding: the politically, economically, and socially dispossessed who are at the mercy of neoliberal global capitalism and its heartless, insidious governance. As Kopenkina states, "new" feminists ask, "What are the conditions within global capitalism that inform and reshape feminist concepts, paradigms, and statements in relation to labor, migration, capital, and democracy?"[2] These artists find their answers in the margins, suggesting that it is the very status of living precariously and being overlooked that may engender new ways of navigating the present and provide novel solutions for a more loving and humane future.

It is clear that this is a feminism based on action, rather than theory, so it is not surprising that a majority of the works shown here are performance-based. As feminist artists of the 1970s demonstrated, the female body is frequently the site upon which a culture writes its laws and metes out its punishments; for that reason, it is the perfect medium to illustrate governmental domination. One of the most potent of these—despite or perhaps on account of its aesthetic paucity—was Liza Morozova's performance *The Mother Russia* (2014). As a response to the Russian annexation of the Crimea and invasion of the Ukraine, Morozova strapped a remote-controlled tank to the top of her head and wandered, both blindfolded and naked, through the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow. Visitors were able to take turns using the tank's remote control, which delivered a mild shock to the artist when certain buttons were pressed, and thus turned her body into a living drone. Morozova never knew when she would be shocked, a metaphor for those under siege in modern warfare. The disconnection engendered by using a joystick—and the cruelty that may be its end result—was apparent, as the crowd was visibly entertained rather than saddened by Morozova's sudden jolts, as though they were merely the shudders of their avatar in a game of *Call of Duty*. Sans clothing and sight, Morozova was doubly defenseless—and her awkward, halting movements as she lurched through the crowd and into walls were an apt representation of the militaristic nation-state shooting blindly at any target available. Finally, so physically bewildered that she could no longer stand, Morozova slumped to the floor. Her form then became analogous to that same militarized mother state's powerless children, easily battered about by economic forces beyond their control, and ultimately shocked into submission.

The female body as innately vulnerable to the whims of a capitalist nation-state is also a major motif in Berlin-based artist Tanja Ostojić's series of videos entitled *Naked Life* (2004–16). The appellation is a direct reference to Giorgio Agamben's concept of "bare life," which theorizes that under certain "states of exception"—what he defines as situations deemed by the sovereign to transcend the rule of law in the name of public good—people are seen as mere human bodies, rather than political citizens with rights and a voice. In *Naked Life 6* (2016), originally a forty-five-minute piece performed in the Society of Advocates Hall in Aberdeen, Scotland, Ostojić climbs atop a table and begins to read a United Nations Human Rights report detailing the horrifically unjust deportations of the Roma across Western Europe. By entering the room in a full, black skirt over brightly mismatched petticoats, and a multitude of ruffled, lacy tops, Ostojić evokes the stereotypical image of a "gypsy" woman. As such, when she narrates the story of fifteen-year-old Johnny Delaney, who was kicked

to death in 2003 by a gang of boys who called him "Gypsy bastard" and then stomped on his head, Ostojić not only relates the cruelty of state-sanctioned racism, but evinces the compassion of the deceased child's mother. While reading the atrocities, Ostojić disrobes, each divested layer symbolic of the way in which the state slowly strips away all dignity, revealing a naked—or bare—life. In structural form, the work pays an implicit homage to Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* (1975), but ups the feminist ante by speaking for a voiceless people, no matter what their gender. By expressly focusing on the Roma, arguably the most mistreated ethnic group in Europe, Ostojić illustrates how a people denied political agency become the scapegoat for other precariats, who are also left emotionally bereft by the cruel illogic of neoliberal economic policies.

Global capitalism has an undeniable ability to ravage the soul of a community, leaving a devastating wake of poverty, drug use, and dispassion. It also has an unerring ability to steal the soul of those people still lucky enough to have a job. This is the subject of *Protect Your Heart at Work* (2012), by Irina Georghe and Alina Pope, two Romanian artists who founded the Bureau of Melodramatic Research. Their twenty-minute video utilizes Martha Rosler's droll but cutting deconstruction of the cultural status quo as seen in her *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977). Georghe and Pope come across as brainwashed hybrids of Sheryl Sandberg and a Stepford wife, dressed for success in gray suits, glasses, and fire engine red lipstick, and parody the clinical delivery of employee instructional videos, the only point of which is to improve the bottom line. They contradict themselves at every topical turn with platitudes like, "protect your heart at work by improving your performance at work." They also mimic the monotonous but seemingly well-meaning middle managers who forever spout off about a stress-free workplace, epitomized by a "global orchestra of happy clicks." Their parody of neoliberal feminism, with its emphasis on individual achievement at work and the erroneous belief that only you are responsible for whether you succeed or fail, is best exemplified by their reminder that, "emotions are positive, it's only you who make them dangerous."

Protect Your Heart at Work alone would have made the exhibition worth seeing. But the fact is that Kopenkina has curated the best exhibition of contemporary feminist art I've ever viewed. These are the artists I've been longing to see for the past decade, creators fully committed to bettering their world, fully cognizant of the fact that while selling on Etsy may pay the bills in the short-term, it won't substitute for a pension. Over and over again, they remind us of our relative privilege, and, therefore, just how egregious our political ignorance really is. Amazingly, not one artist nor work beats us over the head. Rather, a viewer becomes attuned to their own apathy by virtue of the artist's command of her medium. A case in point is Victoria Lomasko's article *Slaves of Moscow* (2014), in which two generations of enslaved humans in the middle of Moscow are shown to be treated far worse than most caged pets. Originally published in the journal *Migrant Labor*, Lomasko's graphic reportage is the form at its finest; it pulls no punches and does not glamorize its protagonists. And this is exactly what makes one sit up and say, "This is real, this is happening." Likewise, the work of Xicana and Californian activist Melanie Cervantes is exemplary printmaking, exploiting the power of the multiple to spread the message, and underscoring that message by means of vivid color and design. Her poster for ELZN, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, colloquially known as the Zapatistas, lists their *ELZN Women's Revolutionary Law* (2010), which sounds like the basic tenets of a universal feminism if there could ever be one. The right to a just salary, to control over one's reproductive choices, to health and nutrition, to childcare, and to freedom from rape and domestic violence surely sounds like a collective uprising most of us could get behind. Cervantes's decision to feature a woman breastfeeding a child in a sling instead of holding a rifle also rebukes the stereotype of the violent revolutionary, and instead evokes compassion.

Performance of *Naked Life* 6 (2016) by Tanja Ostojić; photograph by Maja Zeco

The power of such a simple symbol—a breastfeeding child, a shining star, a grieving mother—used to be one of the ways in which humankind could attempt to speak universally, and this is a theme within *Feminism is Politics!* that is used to great effect. Here the iconography is a bit more contemporary, but no less potent. Anna Zvyagintseva's *Unities* (2012–present) is an actual cooking pot in which she has placed a speaker. As viewers move closer, they hear the sounds of revolutionary fervor rumbling within, recalling the revolutionary power of the people in Maxim Gorky's *Mother* (1906). In *Untitled* (2015), a PSA by the Argentinian feminist collective Mujerers Públicas, it is a wheat-pasted poster of knitting needles and booties with the Spanish phrase, "Todo Con La Misma Aguja" (Everything with the same needle). The booties need no explanation, but the knitting needles are analogous to our coat hanger, a reminder of how unsafe women become when abortions are made illegal. The booties problematize the right's presumption that a woman guiltlessly uses abortion as a means of birth control, and suggests that economic concerns might force her to self-abort a child she would otherwise love to care for.

Patriarchy has no gender, as bell hooks reminds us time and time again, and neither should feminism. It's peculiar then, that Kopenkina did not include any male artists in this exhibition, nor were there any works solely devoted to the ways in which men are exploited in this precarious and uncertain century. These omissions should be forgiven, however, because in all other aspects this is a brilliantly conceived exhibition. I wouldn't expect anything less from a curator who counts Andrea Fraser and Rosler among her teachers, but it is clear that Kopenkina has a vision all her own. It is one this world desperately needs.

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NOTE 1. For a good basic analysis of neoliberal politics and its effect on feminism, see Nancy Fraser's *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (New York: Verso, 2013). 2. Marina Grzinic and Rosa Reitsamer, "New Feminism is Politics!," Introduction to *New Feminism: Worlds of Feminism, Queer and Networking Conditions* (Vienna: Löcker, 2008), 13.