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RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology. Barbican Art Gallery, London, October 5, 2023–January 14, 2024. Curator: Alona Pardo

Locating Resistance in Western Cultural Institutions

RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology, a group exhibition that brought together around 250 pieces by fifty international women and gender-non-conforming artists, opened at the Barbican in London on October 5, 2023. It was followed by *Women in Revolt* at Tate Britain in November, along with several other solo and group exhibitions across London that focused on women artists whose works are often considered to be political interventions. Women and their acts of resistance seemed central in the 2023–2024 London art calendar, which, considering the male-dominated and male-privileging art world and its history, could be seen as a celebratory occasion. Among these exhibitions, *RE/SISTERS* was a major project in scale, but even more so in ambition. Along with its public program and substantial companion volume,[1] the exhibition aimed to examine the relationship between gender and nature by assuming an intersectional and decolonial perspective that views sexism, racism, and environmental injustice as interlinked and historically produced systems of oppression and dispossession whose effects are always felt the most by marginalized communities. This framework challenges discussions around environmental justice that overlook social inequalities rooted in colonial and patriarchal systems of power and control and the claims of communities subjugated by them. Through this curatorial framework, *RE/SISTERS* aimed to reveal extractivism as a product of colonial and patriarchal modes of engaging with the environment and to show that while women are disproportionately affected by the resulting ecological degradation, they also often lead the resistance and foster practices of care to repair, maintain, or reimagine the severed socio-ecological relations at these sites.

The artists included in the exhibition utilize various artistic interventions to expose extractive industries and forms of territorialization, document the slow violence that outlives the immediate operations of extraction,[2] generate new forms of relating to toxic landscapes, document women's resistance movements, and provide alternative modes of thinking about our relationship with nature that are not anthropocentric and heteropatriarchal. In this review, however, I would like to focus on the exhibition's curatorial framework rather than its artworks, and to provide an analysis of the exhibition based on its own claims and the current political moment in which it exists. I was motivated to do so by a statement in the exhibition's companion volume, which opens with a foreword by curator Alona Pardo and Shanay Jhaveri, the Barbican's head of visual arts. In it, they note that the exhibition will travel to Fotomuseum Antwerp in Belgium after the Barbican and state their pleasure in sharing this exhibition with their "European (re)sister" (p. 11). This might seem like an insignificant detail amid the many radical statements made by the exhibition and by the curator, artists, and academics who are referenced in or who have contributed to the companion volume, but I propose to take it seriously, as it reveals where the institution situates itself within the political condition described through the exhibition and what resistance means for the institutional actor.

The notion of the art gallery as a neutral space has long since been shattered, having come under scrutiny in the West through the work of numerous thinkers, scholars, artists, and practitioners from the second half of the twentieth century, giving rise to institutional critique as an art form. The curatorial statement above, defining the institution as a (re)sister, gains significance when considered from this perspective. What makes the interrogation of this statement crucial now, however, is the current political context, particularly the censorship that is systematically practiced by cultural institutions in the United States, United Kingdom, and continental Europe. This censorship became glaringly visible in the public sphere in these institutions' response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the beginning of which coincided with the opening of *RE/SISTERS*. In the past year, many exhibitions and public programs were canceled by institutions, numerous art workers lost their jobs, and grants and awards meant for certain artists were revoked because of the political positioning of works and statements by these individuals in support of the Palestinian struggle for freedom.[3] In response, international cultural workers called for a strike against cultural institutions in Germany, and many artists pulled their work from exhibitions in other countries, including from the Barbican.[4]

Figure 1: Installation view from the exhibition. Photograph: Max Colson, 2023. Courtesy of Barbican Art Gallery.

Figure 2: Installation view from the exhibition. Photograph: Max Colson, 2023. Courtesy of Barbican Art Gallery.

These events have made the enduring influence of Western states' colonial pasts and presents and contemporary geopolitics ever more apparent in contemporary art institutions, even in unexpected ones whose events and exhibition archives are filled with critical programming. This exposed not only the limits of what can be said and done within these institutions and when, but also, and more importantly, the tactics of inclusion and exclusion that these institutions practice. This form of recognition, "the cunning of late liberal recognition" in Elizabeth A. Povinelli's words, functions as a superficial acknowledgement of radical critiques of colonial capitalism and its heteropatriarchal and racist roots.[5] In practice, however, it diffracts these critiques through existing and dominant systems of valuation and worth that are racist, capitalist, and normative, thereby ensuring that the institution or the state and its hierarchies remain intact; meanwhile, critiques of these institutions' ongoing complicity are diverted through soft apologies, which Povinelli terms "liberal disavowal." Consequently, rather than public forums, cultural institutions function as extensions of the state and/or other private (often corporate) funding bodies, as sites where their ideologies become operational and, in many cases, their existing operations are veiled.

As critical practitioners who use contemporary art institutions as public platforms to activate our work, this puts us in a bind. It is not clear if there is a possibility for these institutions to transform, or if a great exodus from Western art institutions is in our future. In the meantime, however, the task at hand is to not let these institutions recede into the background, hidden once again behind the exhibitions and events they organize and the statements they put out. This is especially important for institutions that present themselves as politically progressive. What these institutions actually "institute" should be interrogated, each curatorial decision, editorial intervention, and institutional guideline weighed against the political statements and critiques that are woven into their curatorial frameworks. The concern here is not only institutional hypocrisy but disempowerment through appropriation. It is crucial to ensure that radical critique and acts that are developed over decades—or, in some cases, centuries—of solidarity and resistance, that these artworks are rooted in and that curatorial statements cite are not being co-opted into a façade that keeps these hierarchies of power operating. Therefore, returning to the case of *RE/SISTERS*, I ask, if producing and hosting this exhibition makes an institution a (re)sister, where is the resistance and what does it do?

To address these questions, an initial discussion of how resistance can be practiced is necessary. To that end, I would like to work from within the exhibition and use its artworks and artistic practices as guides. The body of work featured in *RE/SISTERS* offers us a wide scope of interventions, revealing the many forms that resistance can take. For my purposes, however, I would like to discuss those that provide an insight into the practices of making. Among the exhibition's numerous photographic series, Poulomi Basu's *Centralia* (2010–2020) documents the women of the People's Liberation Guerilla Army and their fight against the Indian military's encroachment on Indigenous territories; La Toya Ruby's *Flint is Family* (2016–2020) portrays the residents of Flint, Michigan, protesting the environmental racism they face through the pollution of their water sources; and the Format Photographers' images (1982–1985) record the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in Berkshire, UK, gathered for nuclear disarmament. These images are powerful and affective testaments to movements and acts of resistance often ignored by mainstream media, and making them public in the gallery space (and other platforms) is certainly valuable. Yet focusing on these artists' practices of making rather than the final outcomes relocates these acts of resistance out beyond the gallery space, extending them to the role and effect of artists in the field, to the relationships of trust and solidarity developed between the artists and these communities through long periods of attentive engagement during the processes of making. These practices of making are therefore themselves acts of resistance, solidarity, and care.

Making in solidarity and what it entails can be unpacked further through the practice of Taloi Havini. Her *Habitat* (2017), a three-channel video and one of three in a series, investigates the Panguna copper mine's toxic legacy and its effects on the matrilineal Indigenous community in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, the artist's birthplace. Community members become participants in the production of these videos, not only as protagonists but also through the open decision-making process that the artist follows in creating imag-

es.[6] While *Habitat* is not necessarily a collaborative work, the way in which the landscape and the individuals are represented is discussed with the communities involved, clips are shared with these communities, and the artistic process remains open to their demands. The camera and the artist's knowledge of making are, to an extent, placed in the service of the collective struggle and its needs.

While the process of making in solidarity is less than self-evident in *Habitat* and many other pieces in the exhibition, it is visible in a much older work titled *Touch Sanitation Performance* (1979–1980) by Mierle Laderman Ukeles, known for her "Maintenance Art," where she makes reproductive labor visible. For this performance, she shifts her attention from domestic space to the urban environment. Over the course of eleven months spent as an unsalaried artist in residence at the New York City Department of Sanitation, she met 8,500 sanitation workers across fifty-nine city sanitation districts. She shadowed them throughout the day, mapped their routes, interviewed them, shared with them her own work, and shook their hands, thanking them for their labor. Through this framework, her own reproductive labor becomes a window through which she sees and reaches out to the laboring bodies that keep the urban environment reproducing, forming a physical contact and a relationship. What is presented in the gallery are the images and documents produced through this performance.

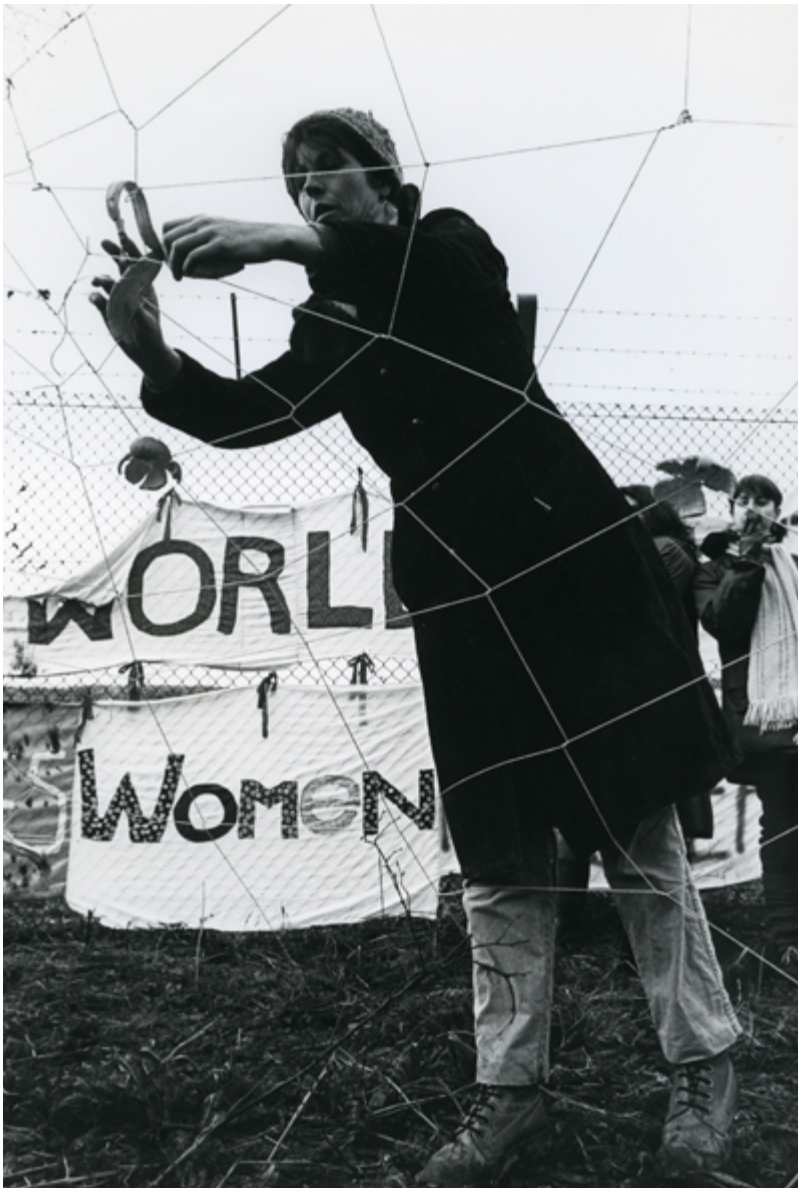

Figure 3: Maggie Murray, Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp - Embrace the Base action 12/12/1982, 1982. Courtesy of Bishopsgate Institute.

These and numerous other works in the exhibition demonstrate that resistance is not merely displaying images of injustice or inequality in a gallery, nor providing alternatives created through solitary reflection and production. Resistance is, first and foremost, produced through the relationships that are formed in the field through practices that are situated, open, and built on reciprocity. The situatedness of many of these artists actively shapes their modes of production—engagements in the field inform their pieces and dictate the methods through which they are produced. Practices of resistance, then, in demanding change, are themselves open to transformation by the collective. Subsequently, they forge new bonds, defying the separation and segregation resulting from colonial subjugation and capitalist modes of production and valuation.

Having broadly mapped the core conditions of practices of resistance through the work in the exhibition, I would like to turn my attention to the curatorial framework and provide a reading of it as a practice to scrutinize what it does in relation to what it says. The critical social claims that make up the backbone of the curatorial framework are woven together through in-depth research by the curatorial team, the contributions of and references to countless scholars in the companion volume, and the two-day conference titled "Resist, Persist: Gender, Climate and Colonialism" held as part of the public program. All the individuals involved have made invaluable contributions to contemporary decolonial, queer, and/or feminist thought and are well known for their research not only in academic circles but also in the art world. The artworks in the exhibition are by artists from various

cultural backgrounds and are located in various parts of the world. At first glance, then, *RE/SISTERS* seems to be covering all its bases and doing everything right. However, when the relationships it establishes and nurtures in the field are examined, a distance begins to grow between the curatorial practice and the decolonial and intersectional approach it claims to adopt.

According to its curatorial statement, the field in which *RE/SISTERS* operates is, broadly, a global cultural field that is interlinked with or originates from women's acts of resistance or resistance movements that engage with the environment. An intersectional and decolonial approach would problematize this global perspective and locate us in parts of the world and in communities that have been affected the most by extractivism and dispossession. More importantly, in approaching curation as a practice, one would expect not only to see these perspectives but to find intentionality in the relationships that are formed through the actual planning and production of the exhibition, such as in determining who the lenders will be, the way resources are shared, and who is invited to be present in the space.

However, recreating the curator's spreadsheet through information available publicly, one quickly discovers that, behind the scenes, the curatorial project fails to keep its own promise at a very preliminary stage. Looking at the exhibition not from within the gallery space but instead through the spreadsheet is a perspectival shift that provides insight into the way in which the institution views and evaluates the exhibition; doing so also renders visible the mechanisms of selection, curation, and instituting that are left out of the curatorial statement. One of the first things the spreadsheet reveals is that the great majority of the artists featured have gallery representation and/or that their works have been borrowed from private collections, museums, or institutions. Of all these galleries, institutions, and collections that have lent work or are involved through representation—around forty, excluding artists' estates and personal archives—only five are non-Western, and four of those five are galleries that have branches in either the United States or Europe. This leaves us with only one non-Western collection, the People's Archive of Rural India. Expectedly, the vast majority of the exhibited work has previously been presented in the United States, United Kingdom, or Europe, and many of the artists have gained the recognition of major Western institutions.

Viewing the exhibition through this spreadsheet, the field in which this curatorial project operates begins to look more like the Western art world, and works and artists that have gained approval through its internal hierarchies of value. That these systems of valuation and inclusion have seeped into the curatorial process is also reflected in the cultural diversity calculations that dictate which artists are invited to participate in the exhibition. This becomes visible on the spreadsheet in the identities of the exhibition artists, almost half of whom are from white backgrounds. This seemingly even distribution is the result of an equation based on whiteness as a norm, where non-white functions as a catchall category for the rest, "the other." If intersectionality is a radical shift in the perspectives from which we look at the world, this formula for diversity represents the obstruction of this shift. It is also noteworthy that while some attention has been paid to include artists or works based in different regions in this compressed category of the other, the entire Middle East and North Africa region is absent from the map the exhibition draws. The spreadsheet reveals that, from the moment it started coming together, the curatorial project was firmly rooted in the West and its systems of valuation. The solidarity, attentiveness, and care practiced in the field by many of these artists, their situatedness and political commitments, do not cross over into the curatorial process.

While the continued circulation of this selection of works might indeed draw attention to the local struggles highlighted by the artists, approaching these works as active objects within the field of the Western art world forces us to reckon with the fact that their circulation, first and foremost, produces value for the Western institutions, collections, and galleries involved. This circulation produces a networked space composed of peripheries from which value is extracted and centers to which it is channeled, reproducing the colonial and capitalist structures that created the separation between the East and the West, the Global North and the Global South, the urban and the rural. The art world's recent interest in environmental issues and struggles, then, follows a model commonly employed by many industries and states in late liberalism, one in which local struggles and radical movements are acknowledged for the sole purpose of self-preservation and production of value. By this means, the geographies devasted by colonial extraction can be folded back into these systems of value for a second time, while the centers and the peripheries remain intact.

The result, in the case of *RE/SISTERS*, is the imposition of the Western perspective on women's acts of resistance on the global scale. The timeline the exhibition draws starts the clock in the 1960s, with second-wave feminism in the West, when Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was published. The earliest work in the exhibition is from 1969, by the Italian artist Laura Grisi, followed until 1990 by thirteen other artists who primarily lived and worked in the United States or United Kingdom. Among their works are the documentation of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the United Kingdom and the Seneca Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice in the United States, both of which carry great emphasis in the exhibition, seeming to mark the global start of women's collective action. Pamela Singh's series *Chipko Tree Huggers of the Himalayas* follows them in 1994, showing the women's movement in Uttarakhand in northern India protecting forests from commercial logging. This sequencing of events reproduces the fabricated narrative that, like many things, women's resistance movements were invented in the white West, then spread to the rest of the world. Arguably one of the most striking works in the exhibition, the undatable Grindmill Songs—

Figure 4: Pamela Singh, Chipko Tree Huggers of the Himalayas #4, 1994. Courtesy of sepiaEYE.

songs of oral history collectively sung and developed by women in Maharashtra over decades while laboring at the grindmill or at home—sits uncomfortably and faded within this framework of Euro-Western ecofeminism.

Regardless of the number of scholarly works cited, as long as inclusivity is the primary objective of critical exhibition making, the risk of exclusion and ejection will always remain on the horizon, as demonstrated by the events of this past year. This approach fails to do anything more than produce value for Western institutions and impose Western systems of valuation and truth. Furthermore, relying solely on gallery visitors' exposure to the work exhibited to produce a meaningful connection or initiate transformation is to remove any and all agency—and responsibility—from the curatorial process. As demonstrated above, the question is not simply about what the works presented in the exhibition do; there are many powerful works included in *RE/SISTERS*. The question is, what does the exhibition, or the curatorial project, achieve in the field, both within and outside the gallery space? Therefore, before we celebrate the foregrounding of women in the art world or the inclusion of Indigenous and non-Euro-Western voices in Western cultural institutions, we must first examine whether this recognition is transforming—or, rather, uprooting—institutional structures and established practices of making, curating, and instituting. Only then can we start discussing an institution being a (re) sister.

Aslı Uludağ
Goldsmiths, University of London
asliuluda@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0006-9552-3024

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1 Alona Pardo, ed., *RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology* (Munich: Prestel, 2023).

2 See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

3 Some of the canceled events include the roundtable discussion featuring Palestinian artist Jumana Manna at the Weiner Center for the Arts; the ceremony at the Frankfurt Book Fair where Palestinian author Adania Shibli was to receive an award for her book *Minor Detail*; the staging of *And Here I Am* in Coisy-le-Roi, a play developed by the Freedom Theatre, based in the Jenin refugee camp; Palestinian artist Emily Jacir's appearance at a workshop in the Hamburger Bahnhof; Palestinian-American artist and scholar Samia Halaby's retrospective at the Eskenazi Museum of Art; and *Afrofuturism*, an exhibition curated by Anaïs Dupan as part of the *We Is Future* exhibition at Museum Folkwang. Other examples of censorship include the cancelation of all live events at the Boston Palestine Film Festival, where virtual screenings were held instead; the Arnolfini in Bristol abandoning plans to host the Bristol Palestine Film Festival; El Museo del Barrio declining to display a work by Odalys Burgoa and Roy Baizan, a Día de los Muertos altar, after the inclusion of a Palestinian flag as part of the altar; and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto pressuring the contributors Sameerah Ahmad, Jenin Yaseen, Malak Kanan, and Dina Omar to remove references to the Palestinian struggle for freedom from their works in the *Death: Life's Greatest Mystery* exhibition. Among those who lost their jobs because of their support for Palestine is David Velasco, who was fired from his position as editor-of-chief at *Artforum* magazine after an open letter calling for a ceasefire in Gaza was reprinted.

4 The Barbican backed out from hosting a lecture on the genocide in Gaza by Pankaj Mishra. In response, a total of six works were pulled by their lenders from the exhibition *Unravel: The Power and Politics of Textiles in Art*. See Lanre Bakare, "Two Artists Withdraw Work from Barbican Show in Row over Gaza Talk," *The Guardian*, March 8, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2024/mar/08/two-artists-withdraw-work-from-barbican-show-in-row-over-gaza-talk.

5 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Between Gaia and Ground: Four Axioms of Existence and the Ancestral Catastrophe of Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

6 Whitechapel Gallery, "Taloi Havini and Margarida Mendes in Conversation," YouTube, May 20, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5baK3icD5Go.