31: Women—An Introduction

31: Women, the Daimler Art Collection’s new Berlin show, references two groundbreaking presentations held at Peggy Guggenheim’s New York gallery Art of This Century, the Exhibition by 31 Women, 1943, and The Women, 1945. Initiator and co-curator was Guggenheim’s friend and advisor, the artist Marcel Duchamp. These were the first exhibitions in the United States that focused, to this extent, exclusively on women artists. The women represented a young generation, from eleven different countries. In terms of content, representatives of Surrealism found themselves alongside abstract painters, Dada-influenced artists and previously unknown new trends.

Taking its lead from these important founding documents of feminist art history, the exhibition 31: Women, with some sixty works from the Daimler Art Collection, brings two longstanding emphases of the collection into sharper focus. The concentration on leading female figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art and the research and projects conducted since 2016 on Duchamp, curatorial practice, and the readymade. Our 31: Women show begins, in historical terms, with works from the Bauhaus and concrete art traditions, moves on to European and American movements such as Zero and Minimalism, and then broadens the horizon with younger artists from India, South Africa, Nigeria, Chile, Israel, the United States, and other countries. The exhibition brings together early feminist trends and global perspectives of contemporary art in surprising constellations and thematic stagings.

31: Women is part of a wider Daimler Art Collection project planned for the period from March 2020 to February 2021. This includes the publication of a book, Duchamp and the Women: Friendship, Cooperation, Network, and a series of lectures, supplementing and accompanying the Berlin exhibition at Daimler Contemporary. Around 60 women who shaped their time as artists, authors, gallery owners, art collectors, publishers, or designers from around 1900 to the present day will be presented in the course of this project.

EXHIBITIONS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN ART HISTORY, CONTEMPORARY REASSESSMENTS AND CONTROVERSIES

The past year, 2019, has seen a remarkable intensification of reassessments, discussions, and controversies on the role of women as objects and subjects in art history. On the one hand, books, exhibitions, and online forums have addressed the exclusion of women from art networks and from the development of artistic tradition, and have conducted a critical analysis of the role of museums in relation to discrimination against feminine esthetics. On the other, there has been discussion of how the contributions of women artists could be included at a new level without engaging in another unworthy falsification of history.

This is one of several subtexts of our exhibition 31: Women. Others are outlined below in this introduction:

- The collecting strategy of the Daimler Art Collection with regard to leading female figures in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art
The Exhibition by 31 Women, 1943, and The Women, 1945, co-curated by Marcel Duchamp, at Peggy Guggenheim’s New York gallery in 1943, as a foundational event in feminist art history.

Finally, the focal points of our current exhibition, 31: Women, are briefly summarized.

EXHIBITIONS ON THE ROLE OF WOMEN ARTISTS, REORGANIZATION OF COLLECTIONS, AND ACQUISITION STRATEGIES: THREE EXAMPLES

Posing Modernity: The Black Model from Manet and Matisse to Today was the title of a show, curated by Denise Murrell, which opened in fall 2018 at the Wallach Art Gallery at Columbia University, New York. In the spring of 2019, under the title Black Models: From Géricault to Matisse, the exhibition traveled, in a substantially expanded form, to the Musée d’Orsay in Paris. While New York addressed only female black models in modern images and thus narrowed the critical debate, from a feminist perspective, Paris extended the investigation to black people of both sexes. Some critics felt that this weakened the discussion through popularization. Yet the accompanying reviews repeatedly stated that for every viewer who followed the line of argument of these exhibitions, the famous works of the nineteenth century—Édouard Manet’s Olympia (1863) or Théodore Géricault’s Le Radeau de La Méduse (The Raft of the Medusa, 1818–1819)—could never again be viewed and discussed in the same way as before. What had happened? Through intensive research, the curators in New York and Paris had managed to identify the names of many of the black models depicted in the paintings as servants, nannies, flower sellers, or slaves. However, this not only restituted the historical individuality of those depicted. It was rather that the underlying social, class-specific, and historical facts shifted into a qualitatively new perspective, and the strategic blindness of art history itself was suddenly exposed to the glare of public scrutiny.¹

A no less controversial international debate was triggered in late summer 2019 at the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, by the rehang, the associated revision of historical stylistic sequences, and the reassessment of the role of women artists in the twentieth century. Over the past few decades, MoMA has repeatedly sought to question the roughly hundred-year-old orientation of white-male-Western art history through thematic exhibitions, publications, and new focal points in the presentation of the collection. With the reopening, a fundamental reconsideration of the museum’s curatorial responsibility and a re-contextualization of more recent art are now openly under discussion.

Contrary to the tradition of separating room sequences and keeping them in line with the succession of art isms, MoMA’s masterpieces have now acquired surprising new neighbors, both male and female. The room displays exhibit 360-degree perspectives with themes that cut across media, cultures, and art-historical traditions. Since, at the same time, the public’s expectations had to be met regarding the sequence of iconic major works, continual rehangs are planned over the coming years so as to critically address new historical constellations and consider art history as a process with constantly changing evaluations and insights.
Important representatives of modern and contemporary art can now meet the more prominent artists on equal terms at MoMA. Louise Bourgeois’s sculpture *Quarantania, I* (1947–1953), along with a major work by the black American woman painter Faith Ringgold, *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), and Pablo Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), can develop new readings by being brought face to face. Henri Matisse’s *La chambre rouge* (1908) finds a dialogic counterpart in Alma Woodsey Thomas’s *Fiery Sunset* (1973). The juxtaposition of Wifredo Lam’s picture *The Jungle* (1943) and the experimental dance film *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) by Maya Deren and Talley Beatty can provide insights into the transposition of existential experience in the relationship between figure, space, and time.

The critical question remains: will the works of women artists—decontextualized and presented in affirmative terms—remain mere supporting voices in the great choir of male Modern and 20. Century Art? Statistics on the presence and rating of female artists in current art discourse raise doubts. In the decade from 2008 to 2018, only eleven percent of new acquisitions for American museums and collections were devoted to women’s art.²

This last fact leads to a discussion currently taking place on the question of how contemporary museums could systematically realign their collection strategies, at least temporarily, so as to correct the gross imbalance in the presence of male and female artists in museum collections.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts took a trailblazing initiative in 2013. The museum generated a profit of around $40 million from the sale of a painting by Edward Hopper and since then it has reinvested this sum in concentrating on acquiring works by international, black, and queer women artists, as well as African American male artists, who are equally underrepresented. The Dia Art Foundation in New York has also played a pioneering role in this respect, initiated essentially by Jessica Morgan, the chief curator since 2015: since then, significant groups of works by Hanne Darboven, Michelle Stuart, Mary Corse, Dorothea Rockburne, Charlotte Posenenske, and Nancy Holt have been acquired and exhibited in what had previously been a massively male-dominated collection.³

In fall 2019, the Baltimore Museum of Art aroused a heated controversy: director Christopher Bedford had sold works by artists such as Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg from the largely masculine-dominated museum collection and announced that the proceeds would be reinvested in 2020 in works by women artists. Surprisingly, this gave rise not only to harsh male criticism, on the grounds that artists would now be exposed to discriminatory measures; a further unexpected result was that misgivings and reproaches were also expressed by female museum representatives and art critics, who argued that this measure was far from sufficient to compensate for the structural imbalance.⁴

**THE DAIMLER ART COLLECTION’S ACQUISITION STRATEGY SINCE 2001**

In retrospect, two early catalogs of the Daimler Art Collection, founded in 1977, enable us to trace its development up to that point, referring here to the inclusion of women artists. *From Arp to Warhol* (1992) presents seventy-five male artists—and just one woman: Christa Näher.⁵

The second catalog, *Geometry as Form* (1999), includes around fifty names, only four of
whom were female artists: Lydia Dona, Verena Loewensberg, Karin Sander, and Yuko Shiraishi. These figures fully reflect the position of many museum and public collections at the time—consideration of art produced by women in the period before 2000 can be estimated at around five percent—and strikingly demonstrate that resistance or ignorance toward women artists lasted well into the late twentieth century.

The Daimler Art Collection currently comprises around 650 artists, 170 of whom are women. Their presence stands at around twenty-five percent: a significant increase, but there is still a long way to go. With the change of management of the collection in 2001, a strategic focus was placed on incorporating women artists, and in the course of a few years, significant individual works or groups of works by female representatives of postwar international avant-garde movements and contemporary art found their way into the collection. In the early 2000s, these included Dadamaino (Italy), Sylvie Fleury (Switzerland), Gail Hastings (Australia), Isabell Heimerdinger (Germany), Tamara K. E. (Georgia), Sarah Morris (USA), Charlotte Posenenske (Germany), Elaine Sturtevant (USA), Simone Westerwinter (Germany), and Andrea Zittel (USA).

They were followed, from 2003, by works of internationally renowned artists such as Jane Alexander (South Africa), Leonor Antunes (Portugal), Jo Baer (USA), Hanne Darboven (Germany), Ulrike Flaig (Germany), Andrea Fraser (USA), Beate Günther (Germany), Silke Radenhausen (Germany), Berni Searle (South Africa), Pamela Singh (India), Katja Strunz (Germany), and in more recent years for example Bethan Huws (UK), Cao Fei (China), Iman Issa (Egypt), and many others. Some of these works and artists are also represented in our current 31: Women exhibition, and can be discussed in new and surprising constellations. For 2020, we have focused, among other things, on acquisitions by artists of black African origin, also presented in this show: Zanele Muholi (South Africa), Nnenna Okore (Australia), Lerato Shadi (South Africa), and Adejoke Tugbiyele (USA).

31: WOMEN: MARCEL DUCHAMP, PEGGY GUGGENHEIM, AND THE YEAR 1943

The American art collector and patron Peggy Guggenheim left France on July 13, 1941 on a plane bound for New York, fleeing from possible persecution by the German occupation in France. In June 1942, Duchamp received a visa for his departure, and initially, having reached New York, he stayed at Guggenheim’s apartment in East 51st Street. The two had been friends since 1938. Duchamp had advised Guggenheim on the exhibition program for her London gallery, as well as on building her art collection, which she started in Paris. On October 20, 1942, Peggy Guggenheim opened her new museum-gallery, Art of This Century, at 30 West 57th Street, New York. The great attraction was the extravagant interior designed by Frederick Kiesler: organically undulating walls, unusual lighting, sound effects, and above all numerous unconventional forms of presentation for the artworks on display.

It was Marcel Duchamp who provided the idea for and co-curated the first exhibition at Peggy Guggenheim’s gallery to focus exclusively on female avant-garde artists: Exhibition by 31 Women (January 5–31, 1943). Two exhibitions that Duchamp could have seen may have served as models here. In 1934, the American art collector and feminist Katherine S. Dreier, a friend of Duchamp and his partner in many joint projects, presented works by thirteen women painters from the Société Anonyme collection in New York under the title From Impressionism
to Abstraction: 13 Women Painters from France, Germany, Belgium, Norway, Poland and the United States. The first exhibition in France devoted exclusively to women artists, in this case from Europe, opened in Paris in 1937: Les Femmes artistes d’Europe exposent au Musée du Jeu de Paume (February 11–28).

Peggy Guggenheim’s show primarily featured works by female representatives of Surrealism such as Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, Valentine Hugo, Meret Oppenheim, and Dorothea Tanning, and abstract paintings by Irene Rice Pereira, Hedda Sterne, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp; furthermore, pictures and objects by Djuna Barnes, Xenia Cage, Frida Kahlo, Suzy Frelinghuysen, Louise Nevelson, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven were also included; and lastly, some works by a number of largely unknown younger women artists such as Gypsy Rose Lee, Peggy Guggenheim’s sister, Hazel McKinley, and her daughter, Pegeen Vail Guggenheim.

The great attention that the Exhibition by 31 Women had attracted among the press and the public prompted Peggy Guggenheim to organize a follow-up exhibition in 1945: The Women (June 12–July 7). Many of the artists, of whom there were now thirty-three in all, had taken part in the first exhibition, although this time Guggenheim shifted the focus from the surrealist to the abstract tendencies of the time, incorporating new names such as Nell Blaine, Louise Bourgeois, Lee Krasner, Charmion von Wiegand, and Catherine Yarrow. These pioneering exhibitions on female representatives of avant-garde art were revisited once again with the exhibition Art of This Century: The Women at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice in 1997.

The importance of these two Women exhibitions 1943/45 at the time, and especially for the American context, cannot be overstated. For many female artists, their presence in Guggenheim’s prestigious gallery, the attention of the press and the public, and contact with Duchamp and his cultural network were a springboard for their future careers. Exhibitors who were the partners of famous artists of the time, such as Xenia Cage, Jacqueline Lamba (the wife of André Breton), and Kay Sage (married to Yves Tanguy), were perceived, for the first time, as cultural players in their own right. After the progress achieved by women in the arts, culture, and social spheres at the beginning of the twentieth century, the rise of fascist politics in Europe, right-wing sentiments, and the upheavals of the Second World War had produced a regression to a thoroughly male-dominated society, which also had a huge impact on the art system. In this context, the exhibitions organized by Peggy Guggenheim, who was not only a big name, as a member of one of the most famous business families in America, but also a successful gallerist, were a powerful signal.

Two further points must be recalled here. Already during the 1920s, Peggy Guggenheim had financially and ideologically supported woman artists and authors in her circle of friends: Berenice Abbott, Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, Emma Goldman, and Mina Loy. In addition to the women artists presented in 1943 and 1945, she also presented young female artists of the time in her Spring Salon for Young Artists, and nine women had solo exhibitions in her gallery. These facts have led feminist art critics to recognize that Peggy Guggenheim is to be considered one of the most important proponents of female art in her time—contrary to the usual perception of her as a scandalous femme fatale:
While Art of This Century served as an energizing starting point for the careers of many women artists, it also served in a theoretical sense as the site that set the stage for a discourse on gender that continues today. When Guggenheim’s impact on twentieth-century art is discussed, the dramatic and anecdotal stories often take precedence over the facts. Whether we like it or not, Peggy Guggenheim, with her zany glasses, outlandish statements, and soap opera-like memoirs, is the heart of this transitional space for American women artists.

As Martica Sawin put it: “Whether by chance or intention, Guggenheim was, in effect, a constructor of history.” And in this context, in Marcel Duchamp she had a collaborator who energetically and intelligently encouraged her in her orientation toward an anti-hierarchical, gender-inclusive policy on the artists she exhibited and supported.

100 YEARS OF THE READYMADE, DUCHAMP, AND THE FEMALE AVANT-GARDE FROM 1900 TO THE PRESENT: RECENT PROJECTS, PUBLICATIONS, AND RESEARCH

The impulse for this exhibition, 31: Women, dates back to research begun in 2016 and pursued jointly with Duchamp expert Katharina Neuburger for a symposium and a publication by the Daimler Art Collection on the theme of “Duchamp as Curator.” These projects investigated Duchamp’s curatorial activities and their relevance to his artistic work. Based on this research and extensively expanded, a first publication was created in 2019 (text: Wiehager), which chronologically presents Duchamp’s curatorial activities related to exhibitions, collections and publications.

A hundred years of the readymade: in 2016 and 2017, the centenary of Duchamp’s first written mention of the term “readymade” in 1916 and of the first display of Fountain in New York in 1917 prompted the Daimler Art Collection to give the concept of the readymade a more thorough grounding both in theoretical terms and in exhibition practice. On the Subject of the Ready-Made, or Using a Rembrandt as an Ironing Board: Works from the Daimler Art Collection Selected by Bethan Huws on the Occasion of 100 Years of the Ready-Made was the title of an exhibition at Daimler Contemporary in Berlin (2016–2017). Welsh conceptual woman artist Bethan Huws devised an exhibition project as well as an artist book specifically for the location, with exemplary works from the collection. As a next step, the exhibition The Duchamp Effect: Readymade; Works from the Daimler Art Collection at the Kunsthalle Göppingen (2016–2017) traced the historical significance of the “readymade concept.” In 2020, the subject is being further pursued with the current 31: Women exhibition. I would like to thank the Daimler Art Collection core team, Susanne Bronner, Claudia Grimm, Monika Daubner, and in Berlin mainly Kathrin Hatesaul, then our doctoral assistants Wiebke Hahn (until 2019), Nadine Henrich (1917–2020) and Sarah Maske (2019), as well as our intern Maria Radke (2019–2020), for the organizational implementation of these shows.

The 31: Women exhibition is being accompanied by the publication of Duchamp and the Women: Friendship, Collaboration, Network, again in collaboration with Katharina Neuburger. This book offers an unusual perspective on the “artist of the century,” Marcel Duchamp.
Through art-historical essays and biographical portraits of some eighty leading female figures who shaped Duchamp’s life and work from the early twentieth century to the 1960s, it discusses major initiatives and collaborations which accompanied and inspired Duchamp’s artistic projects. Furthermore, important texts by women that were previously available only in inaccessible sources or published exclusively in French or English are made available and translated into German.

The book focuses on the social and cultural activities of female collectors, gallery owners, artist colleagues, and authors, many of whom were leading figures of early-twentieth-century modernism. It reveals the featured women’s formative influence on their times in Europe and the United States and presents their artistic, cultural, and socio-political achievements. Reflecting the intention of the editors, Duchamp and the Women consciously avoids clichés such as the retelling of erotic relationships, the stereotypes of creator and muse, or the uncovering of psychological motivations (even though a few of the featured women did indeed, temporarily, have intimate relationships with him).

Duchamp’s friendships with women, many of which lasted for decades, were particularly significant to him, both for the development of his work and for his specific artistic decisions. The book presents these women for the first time in relation to Duchamp’s personal and cultural context, from his youth until his death in 1968, and acquaints readers with cultural circles and artistic movements in which the featured women were active participants and on which they exerted a notable influence in their own right.

Along with short biographies of around sixty-five women who influenced Marcel Duchamp’s work, the central emphasis of the book lies in fifteen detailed essays on leading figures of early modernism and spokespersons for a qualitatively new feminism with whom Duchamp was closely connected or whose work he admired. The most significant biographical details and works of the women are presented, but the focus is always on personal contacts and conceptual collaborations related to Duchamp. Essays are devoted to Louise Arensberg, Djuna Barnes, Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, Katherine S. Dreier, Suzanne Duchamp, Peggy Guggenheim, Mina Loy, Maria Martin, Louise Norton, Mary Reynolds, Carrie, Florine and Ettie Stettheimer, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and Beatrice Wood.

The salient issues raised in the book will also be presented in a public lecture series in Berlin during the course of the 31:Women exhibition.

**Constellations and Themes of the Current 31:Women Exhibition**

The following is a brief description of the constellations of artists and works in our 31:Women exhibition as they present themselves to viewers visiting the show. “Minimalism and After: Political, Poetic, and Personal Reassessments” is the introductory section. It presents combinations of artistic works that deal in various ways with the upheavals in the art of the 1960s. Minimalism, with its perfect formal language, is subjected to critical revision in the works of Marcia Hafif (USA), Kazuko Miyamoto (Japan), Efrat Shvily (Israel), Natalia Stachon (Poland), and Katja Strunz (Germany).

A second main focus is devoted to “Geometries, Proportions, Harmonies: Between Abstraction and Contemporary Living Space,” bringing together the artists Anni Albers (Germany), Ilit Azoulay (Israel), Anne Beothy Steiner (Austria-Hungary), Mary Corse (USA), Andrea Fraser (USA), Silke Radenhausen (Germany), Amalia Valdés (Chile), and Andrea Zittel...
(USA). Associated with the abstract concepts of geometry, proportion, space, and harmony are no less significant substantive and socio-political propositions, from the utopias of early modernity to current institutional-critique and feminist issues.

“Hidden, Uncanny, Intuitive, Unconscious” is the next focus of the exhibition, containing a group of works by Amit Berlowitz (USA), Madeleine Boschan (Germany), Dadamaino (Italy) and Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster (France). Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny, which he developed in an article in 1919, could be seen as a connecting thread. Freud uses the term *uncanny* to denote things or situations that are familiar and well-known but at the same time arouse a feeling of anxiety.

Six artists are shown under the heading “Hybrids, Transculturality, and New Concepts”: Sonia Khurana (India), Zanele Mhohli (South Africa), Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (UK), Berni Searle (South Africa), Lerato Shadi (South Africa), and Adejoke Tugbiyele (USA). Their work addresses postcolonialism, feminism, and a contemporary perspective on identity politics and gender construction, thus forming a central feature of this section.

The exhibition concludes with a constellation of eight women artists grouped around the subject of “Bodies, Cycles, Identities,” involving works by Ulrike Flaig (Germany), Beate Günther (Germany), Isabell Heimerdinger (Germany), Tamara K. E. (Georgia), Charlotte Moorman (USA), Nnenna Okore (Australia), Berni Searle (South Africa), and Adejoke Tugbiyele (USA). The broadest possible spectrum of themes, both controversial and complementary, is presented here: feminine archetypes, cosmic rhythms and cycles of individual life, dance and aggression, war and wounding, identity change and role-play.

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1 For a summary of this discussion, see Emmely Butterfield-Rosen, “The Modern Woman,” *Artforum* 58, no. 2 (October 2019): 188–201.


7 Until 2000, the Daimler Art Collection was directed by Hans Baumgart. Since 2001, it has been headed by the author of this essay.


10 From Impressionism to Abstraction, American Woman’s Association Clubhouse, New York, November 14–December 8, 1934. This exhibition subsequently traveled to the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut, as a second venue (December 13, 1934–January 30, 1935). See Katherine S. Dreier and Marcel Duchamp, eds., Collection of the Société Anonyme: Museum of Modern Art 1920 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, for the Association of Fine Arts, 1950), 211.

11 Overall, the exhibition presented a broad spectrum of 500 works by more than 100 artists; cf. the catalog accompanying this exhibition: Musée du Jeu de Paume, ed., Les Femmes artistes d’Europe exposent au Musée du Jeu de Paume (Paris: Musée du Jeu de Paume / Musée des écoles étrangères contemporaines, 1937).

12 Cf. Kate Buckley, “Peggy Guggenheim and the Exhibition by 31 Women” (Senior Thesis, Maryland Institute College of Art, Fall 2010), 9, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303688428_Peggy_Guggenheim_and_The_Exhibition_by_31_Women [July 28, 2019]. Further artists represented were MériadGuevara, Anne Harvey, Buffie Johnson, Jacqueline Lamba Breton, Aline Meyer Liebman, Milena Pavlović-Barili, Barbara Reis, Kay Sage Tanguy, Gretchen Schoeninger, Sonja Sekula, Esphyr Slobodkina, Julia Thecla and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva.


15 In the 1990s, Siobhan M. Conaty was still able to speak with women artists who were involved in the 1943 and 1945 exhibitions at Guggenheim’s Gallery and who spoke of a “dominant macho attitude” in the United States during this time. See Conaty, note 13, 35.

16 Dearborn, note 8, 18, 64, 116, 160, 171, 175, 236, 348.

17 Conaty, note 13, 37.


21 Renate Wiehager and Dieter Association Paris, On the Subject of the Ready-Made or Using a Rembrandt as an Ironing Board: Works from the Daimler Art Collection Selected by Bethan Huws on the Occasion of 100 Years of the Ready-Made, exh. cat. (Berlin: Daimler Contemporary, 2016). The publication can be ordered online: https://art.daimler.com/publication/on-the-subject-of-the-ready-made-or-using-a-rembrandt-as-an-ironing-board/