

THE NEW SCHOOL

VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness

Seminar 2: Feminist Manifestos

December 3, 2018

SUMMARY

Participants

Becca Albee, visual artist and musician

Chiara Bottici, Associate Professor of Philosophy, The New School for Social Research

Silvia Federici, philosopher, scholar, writer and activist from the radical autonomist Marxist tradition

A.L. Steiner, visual artist, teacher, collaborator and co-founder of Ridykeulous and Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.)

Gabriela López Dena, Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellow, Art & Social Justice; moderator

At each pronouncement, speech is embodied by a particular individual at a specific moment in a specific site which all bring forth their own histories, that was the gist of the second seminar. Throughout the day across The New School campus, women, men and others [?], students, faculty and staff were reciting from historical and contemporary manifestos demanding equality for women. Selected by Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellow Gabriela López Dena, they ranged from Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of Women's Rights* from 1791 to artist Mierle Ukeles Laderman's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!* to the Zapatista Women's welcome greeting to the first Indigenous Women's Gathering in 2018 and Nayéléni's *Women's Declaration on Food Sovereignty*, and were read in places where they mattered most: elevators, cafeterias, dormitories, classrooms, or the foyer to the university president's offices. In some cases, crowds began to gather around the person reading; in others, the student masses simply washed by the speaker, seemingly oblivious to their calls.

In the evening, we gathered for an exchange with some of those who had read the manifestos as well as artist and musician **Becca Albee**, philosophers **Chiara Bottici** and **Silvia Federici**, and artist **A.L. Steiner**, a co-founder of Working Artists and the Greater Economy (W.A.G.E.), moderated by **Gabriela López Dena**. Each of them began their presentation by reading a manifesto.

Becca started us off by offering her own version of a land acknowledgment: for several minutes she read the names of hundreds of women to whom a 1978 textbook by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers had been dedicated. The dedication acknowledged the work of those on who the book

had been built, and the jump to labor relations and questions of visibility came easily: *Wages for Housework* from 1978, presented by Silvia, positions wages as a capitalist instrument to render invisible non-waged work, i.e. the labor at the time predominantly still performed by women in the privacy of the home, today relevant for the conditions of the gig-economy. Becca's installation *Prismatera* where text only becomes legible in a certain light provided a useful foil to ask the question of visibility: Which conditions need to be met to make something invisible visible, or heard?

Chiara picked up that question in her reading of the current version of the anarchy-feminist manifesto, arrived at through a trans-individual process of assembling fragments of other manifestos and continuously re-articulating its stated goals through a collective, aggregational online process that she's currently developing. Her call to defy a system that oppresses women by acting as if one were in control of it raised issues of privilege: who can afford to question a system that they are part of? How does academia relate to politics, theory to practice (or activism)? What agency do we have in a system that we are ourselves implicated in? A.L. Steiner, who had read Valie Export's *Women's Art as Manifesto* from 1972, reminded people that reality is a social construction with men as its engineers and that the notion of freedom itself was a conservative construct.

As we considered the uncomfortable contradictions we inhabit and our invariable complicity in systems of power, some called to embrace such experiences of discomfort, to hold contradictions within us, to stay in a moment of suspension from usefulness, and that being political means to continuously engage in the labor of disentangling these conflicts and examining the blind spots. The slow work of "borderless feminism" (Spivak) could mean, some posited, that we need to embrace concepts of mobility and flux and embrace the multiplicity of historical times that are present at each moment and part of every identity and speech act.

Where does this leave us for Seminar 3? A recognition that the individual voice can amount to a chorus of other articulations, that every pronouncement is something else at another moment, that history reverberates in all pronouncements, that resistance is personal, that etc. etc.

*The seminar series **Freedom of Speech. A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness** is organized by the Vera List Center for Art and Politics as part of the center's 2018–2020 curatorial focus *If Art Is Politics*. It is directed by Carin Kuoni, Director/Chief Curator, Vera List Center, and Laura Raicovich with assistance by Gabriela López Dena. Partner organizations for the seminars are ARTICLE 19, the National Coalition Against Censorship, New York Peace Institute, and Weeksville Heritage Center. This seminar is co-presented in partnership with the National Coalition Against Censorship. *Feminist Manifestos* is curated by Gabriela López Dena, Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellow, Art and Social Justice.*

Further information on each seminar, including SUGGESTED READINGS, PROGRAM, SUMMARY, and VIDEO DOCUMENTATION, at www.veralistcenter.org.