

THE NEW SCHOOL

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# VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS

Freedom of Speech: A Curriculum for Studies into Darkness

Seminar 2: Feminist Manifestos

December 3, 2018

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## SUMMARY

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### *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 an individual acting at a historical moment in a specific site, all of which bring forth their own histories – that was the gist of the second seminar. Throughout the day across The New School campus, students, faculty and staff were reciting from historical and contemporary manifestos demanding equality for women. Proposed by Vera List Center Graduate Student Fellow Gabriela López Dena, the manifestos ranged from Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration of Women's Rights* from 1791 to artist Mierle Ukeles Laderman's *Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!*, from the Zapatista Women's Welcome at the First Indigenous Women's Gathering in early 2018 to Nayéléní's *Women's Declaration on Food Sovereignty*. What made these readings so poignant is that each was read in a place where it mattered most: elevators, cafeterias, dormitories, classrooms, or the foyer to the university president's offices. Each reading thus resonated with the distinct social and economic conditions of each site demonstrating and enacting intersectional feminism. 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 met for an exchange with people who had read manifestos during the day, our regular seminar participants 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 the four began their presentation with a manifesto.

Becca started us off by reading an expanded "manifesto," an alternative to the traditional land acknowledgment: hers was a long list of first names of hundreds of women to whom the Federation of

Feminist Women's Health Centers had dedicated their text book from 1978, not because these women had written for the book but because its content was built on the intellectual and activist foundations they had provided in their times. The jump to labor relations and questions of visibility came easily: *Wages for Housework*, also from 1978 and presented by Silvia, positions wages as a capitalist instrument to render invisible non-waged work. At the time of the book's publication such labor was still predominantly performed by women in their homes, a situation that has renewed relevance in today's gig-economy. Becca then described her installation *Prismatera* where text panels only become legible in a certain light: Which conditions need to be met to make something invisible visible, or heard?

Chiara took up the issue of conditions of visibility by reading the most up-to-date version of the anarcho-feminist manifesto, an ever evolving text that gets shaped by a trans-individual process of continuously assembling fragments of other manifestos and re-phrasing its goals through an aggregational online process. Later, Chiara's call to defy a (academic) system that oppresses women by acting as if one were in control of it raised issues of privilege: who can afford to challenge a system 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 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 related articulations, that every pronouncement is something else at another moment, that history reverberates in all pronouncements, and that resistance is still personal.

*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](http://www.veralistcenter.org).*