

# Special section editorial

## Hitting home: representations of the domestic milieu in feminist art

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The politics of the home was often a focus in second-wave feminist art in the West. Influenced by Betty Friedan's *The feminist mystique* (1963), which challenged the notion that women were content to be wives, mothers, and homemakers, artists often represented the domestic milieu as a space of oppression. Friedan's ideas would, however, be challenged by bell hooks, who indicated that such perceptions assumed a woman who was middle-class and white. As hooks observed in *Feminist theory: from margin to center* (1984:2), Friedan 'did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife'. It should also be noted that Friedan's views were shaped by a US-specific context and that the politics of home, domesticity, marriage, or parenthood may be perceived very differently in geographies outside the United States or the West, more generally, including South Africa.

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In a conference held online under the ambit of my SARChI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture between 14 and 17 November 2022, a range of participants explored how the home has been conceptualised in feminist art practices, both historical and recent. Participants were asked to engage with how the domestic

Original research

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environment and its politics have been explored in feminist works outside the West, as well as inviting new perspectives on the conception of the domestic milieu by feminist artists operating within Western contexts. The notion of 'the domestic environment' or 'the home' was interpreted in a broad rather than narrow sense, and submissions were by no means limited to the politics of household labour, although this topic is relevant. Rather, the topic was understood to encompass feminist explorations of family relationships and interactions – motherhood, parenting, spousal interactions, sisterhood, widowhood, etc. – as well as events that structure and change domestic life, such as marriage or childbirth.

The articles included here are derived from a selection of these papers. Each (including my own) was double-blind peer-reviewed once it had been shaped into an article, and rewriting and reshaping proceeded from that.

The special issue begins with two articles that, in a sense, bookend recent history by exploring constructs of home at, respectively, the turn of the current millennium and the end of its second decade. In 'Material worlds: domestic objects and the question of auto/biography in contemporary art', Zarza suggests how art focused on autobiography and personal experience, which was dismissed as narcissistic and irrelevant when it emanated from second-wave feminists in the West, was welcomed in the early years of the millennium, setting out to explain the shifts and paradoxes involved. In the context of an increasingly globalised art world, where there were attempts to overcome cultural divides, biographical explanations were convenient. Qualities of what Zarza terms 'material subtlety' and 'conceptual ambivalence' (in contrast to qualities of second-wave feminism) allowed works from outside the West to seem at home in international exhibitions. However, worryingly, the biographical explanations attached to such works were also limiting. They ultimately meant that more complex or political implications of their subject matter of form were inclined to be, in a sense, foreclosed by explanations of works only in terms of personal experience.

In the second article, 'Home is where the art is? Reflections on changing notions of home and contemporary art practices in the wake of the pandemic', Jacqueline Millner focuses on how constructs of the domestic have shifted fundamentally in the more immediate past and how they might do so in the future. Looking at various Australian women-identifying artists, a term she prefers to 'women artists', Millner explores how the prejudices against those who 'work from home' were complicated during COVID. Although not leading to a new valuation of domestic labour, as one might have hoped, it has, in fact, increased the unremunerated work of many. The

outcome, she suggests, is that some have stopped practicing as artists, others have chosen to work digitally, and still others have found in the domestic the wherewithal for focusing on care ethics.

The third and fourth articles focus on geographical displacements and how 'home' might be constructed by women artists in situations of exile. Such constructs can become exceedingly complex in instances where artists are refugees or children of refugees and where the original 'home' no longer exists or is no longer accessible. What happens when 'home' becomes a purely imaginary space? How might trauma be processed in a new home that offers a respite, but in a space to which one lacks a sense of belonging? And how might these experiences of displacement be informed and inflected by feminist concerns? In 'Being (not) at home: exiled women artists in postwar New York', Virginia Murano explores how Ruth Vollner, Louise Nevelson, and Eva Hesse – all exiles in New York – each found a visual language to explore how ideas of migration and processes of defining a new sense of home were experienced. Maria Photiou's 'Re-claiming the lost home: the politics of nostalgia and belonging in women's art practices in the Middle East' draws on concepts of the uncanny (*unheimlich*, meaning literally 'un-homely') as well as Svetlana Boym's ideas about restorative and reflective nostalgia to explore how 'home' is configured in works by Klitsa Antoniou, Lia Lapithi, Raeda Saadeh, and Andrea Shaker.

Focussing on concepts of home enables discussions of an idea that enjoys currency in contemporary feminist discourses and practices – namely, an ethics of care. Devised to counter and resist neoliberalism, care ethics focus on support, sharing, and an attitude of mutuality. Invoked in Millner's essay, the idea is also explored in the fifth and sixth articles of the volume. In 'Joanna Rajkowska's *Rhizopolis* (2021): a rhizomatic refuge for caring commons', Basia Sliwinska refers to four features proposed by The Care Collective in a 2020 manifesto, namely 'mutual support, public space, shared resources and local democracy' (The Care Collective 2020, 45). In her article, she deploys these to unpack how Rajkowska's installation, *Rhizopolis*, may be interpreted as an attempt to invoke a habitat of this type. 'Inside The Red Mansion: Füsün Onur's world of objects, care relations, and art', authored by Nergis Abiyeva and Ceren Özpınar, focuses on The Red Mansion (or *Hayri Onur Yalısı*) in Kuzguncuk, Türkiye. A space where artist Füsün Onur has lived her whole life and which she co-habited with her sister Ilian until the latter's death in 2022, it is also an artwork or installation. Abiyeva and Özpınar explore selected objects in the The Red Mansion in the context of the ideas of home, family, and mutual care.

Many forms of needlework have historically been linked to domesticity, female labour, and power relations within the home. Quilting is one especially resonant manifestation, being associated in the United States with not only communities of women gathering in quilting bees to bring creative work to fruition, but also labour by enslaved women. Faith Ringgold has made rich and compelling reference to these traditions, while also narrating stories within the present in her so-called 'story quilts'. In 'At home in Harlem: the politics of domesticity in Faith Ringgold's *The Bitter Nest*', Debra Hanson focuses on a five-piece work that has hitherto been neglected in prior literature, revealing how the narrative in *The Bitter Nest* speaks compellingly of Black female agency and the politics of family.

The next four articles in the special issue focus on contemporary South African practitioners and how they refer to norms and practices in the domestic milieu that shape understandings of femininity and womanhood. In 'The art of labour: representations of childbirth by Reshada Crouse and Christine Dixie', I suggest that both Crouse and Dixie offer feminist responses to discourses from the West that pertain to childbirth, but in different ways. I reveal how both artists first deployed the topic when they themselves had given birth, but also returned to it many years later when past childbearing age – and suggest reasons for its later relevance to them and their practice.

Shonisani Netshia's "'Sweep the yard girl": brooms, wifely duties and the subversive art of Usha Seejarim' offers an engagement with the ways in which brooms are often used symbolically to inculcate female subservience, as well as the ways in which such a tradition is inverted by Seejarim who instead uses them to suggest female power and agency. Focusing on the *makoti* (bride) and her relationship with her *mamazala* (mother-in-law) in particular, she deploys her own positionality as somebody who is Venda and who has herself been subject to the regulatory practices she speaks about to engage with the particularities of the topic.

As with Netshia's discussion of Seejarim's work, Karen von Veh explores the works of an artist who resists norms and gendered understandings – in her case, Linda Rademan's resistance against the patriarchal Calvinist ideas that shaped her upbringing in a home where Afrikaner nationalist understandings of the world held sway. Von Veh shows how the artist uses sewing in such a way that it not only refers to a historically feminine form of labour, but also conveys the idea of suturing the wounds from a damaged childhood.

Resistance against normative understandings of femininity is also at play in a video that Farieda Nazier made in 2021, which Roxy Do Rego explores in 'Labour, love,

or violence? Farieda Nazier's *Don't Make Me Over* (2021)'. Do Rego suggests that Nazier's work, which refers to a song recorded by Dionne Warwick in 1962, refuses an association of not only women but also black women with domestic labour. Through its references to the Forge Theatre, Do Rego also suggests that Nazier engages with the idea of femininity as a masquerade.

The final article in this special issue turns to the realms of the curatorial in South Africa. In 'Cleansing shame: airing South Africa's dirty laundry', Dineke Orton examines an exhibition entitled 'SA's dirty laundry', which was installed in the Maboneng precinct of Johannesburg in 2016. Consisting of what seemed to be a domestic washing line with donated panties suspended on it, the show was deployed by curators Jenny Nijenhuis and Nondimiso Msimanga to refer to the self-narratives of survivors of rape. Orton discusses how the show enabled an articulation of the scope of rape while also being empowering in the sense of suggesting togetherness and mutuality on the part of survivors, as well as invoking the metaphor of washing and cleansing.

## References

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