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## Feminist tactics of citation, annotation, and translation: Reflections on the Now You Can Go programme

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Gabrielle Moser, Helena Reckitt

# **Feminist Tactics of Citation, Annotation, and Translation: Curatorial Reflections on the Now You Can Go programme**

**Helena Reckitt:** In December 2015 I worked with six other feminist curators, artists, and researchers to develop an events programme in London called Now You Can Go (see <http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com> (<http://nowyoucango.tumblr.com>)). Through panel discussions, talks, performances, film screenings, workshops, and a reading group, and taking place across four venues—The Showroom, the ICA, Raven Row, and Space Studios—the series explored the resonance of Italian feminisms from the 1970s and 1980s in relation to questions of intergenerational feminism, consciousness raising, and affective withdrawal.

When I thought about reflecting on the programme for this issue of *OnCurating*, you were the first person I wanted to think it over with. For one thing, you have an outside perspective, as you came to London for the series, and attended almost all of its events. Yet you are hardly a disinterested spectator. You have

been researching withdrawal, strike, and exit for a show you are curating in Canada. We have also been in dialogue about affective labour and contagion for several years, after you sent me texts from the If I Can't Dance... reading group on affect that you were exploring with the Toronto branch, and which I read with curating masters students in London. I'm interested in how the Now You Can Go programme did, and didn't, meet your expectations.

**Gabby Moser:** Perhaps because I've been thinking so much about strategies of striking and the withdrawal of labour in my curatorial research, I expected there to be more focus on this theme in the programme. There were a few events that directly addressed work and exit strategies, such as the panel on social reproduction at the ICA—which included Marissa Begonia from Justice for Domestic Workers and Nic Beurat from the activist group Plan C—Giovanna Zapperi's talk about Carla Lonzi's tactics of withdrawal, and two panel discussions titled, "In or Out?: On Leaving the Art World and Other Systems".

**HR:** One of which you chaired, though I think we were both surprised that the artists, thinkers, and activists that we invited did not address the question of exit strategies more directly.

**GM:** Yes, exactly. Though I do wonder whether there is something unrepresentable, or perhaps difficult to represent, about the gesture of striking or withdrawing? This is an issue I'm tackling in trying to pull together works on this theme for the

exhibition I'm curating. But what surprised me with Now You Can Go was the centrality of Italian feminism to the whole programme, both the ideas of Carla Lonzi and Rivolta Femminile and the work of Adriana Cavarero and the Milan Women's Bookstore collective. That was a body of feminism that was unfamiliar to me, and which I found incredibly generative and exciting. I suppose what has become the central theme for me as I reflect on the programme are practices of citation, annotation, and translation, and how these strategies can activate feminist practices and feminist knowledges from the past in the present moment.



Claire Fontaine, Taci, anzi parla brickbat, 2015. Photo: Courtesy of the artist

**HR:** Citation has become *the* key model for how I think about intergenerational feminisms. I am interested in the importance of citation in both a traditional, bibliographic way—who we reference, who we acknowledge—as well as part of a broader understanding of where we put our energy.

**GM:** Can you give me some examples?

**HR:** Sara Ahmed, for instance, in her work of queer feminist phenomenology, foregrounds the affective implications of how we orient ourselves towards others, through literary reference as much as through physical movement. Another current example is the work of the artist Céline Condorelli, which explores friendship as a lived condition, wherein one befriends ideas and issues as well as people, and which has its own responsibilities and demands. In her recent exhibition *The Company She Keeps*, she named each artwork after a friend who had influenced and sustained her. She takes a similar approach in her PhD thesis, which is called *In Support*. The dissertation enacts her debt to the various artistic, cultural, and critical projects that provide the frame of reference and legibility for her work. Instead of the traditional one or two pages of acknowledgements, she includes sixteen pages of “Dedications” which hail an earlier creative or critical project without which her project “could have never happened” [1]. ([issue-29-reader/feminist-tactics-of-citation-annotation-and-translation-curatorial-reflections-on-the-now-you-can-go-programme.html#n1](#)).

**GM:** It was precisely this idea of indebtedness that I found so appealing about the workshops on translation and annotation in Now You Can Go. Both the “Intimate Acts” workshop that Kajsa Dahlberg and Laura Guy organised, which asked participants to

quote from, and then collectively annotate or translate, sources that were meaningful to them, and Alex Martinis Roe's "Our Future Network" workshop were transformative for my practice as a writer and curator. The ideas of the Milan Women's Bookstore collective, which are central to Roe's work and this workshop, have directly influenced my work in Toronto. Since returning from London, I've started a reading and working group with artists Annie MacDonell and Cecilia Berkovic and curators Leila Timmins and cheyanne turions that will explore relationships of *affidamento*, or "entrustment", between women, and use writing and autobiography to think about questions of voice, authority, and citation. We're calling the group EMILIA-AMALIA.



Venezia, Party at the new Jacqueline's flat, 1976. Photo by Jacqueline Vodoz © Fondazione Jacqueline Vodoz e Bruno Danese

**HR:** That's a direct Milan Women's Bookstore reference!

**GM:** Yes, the name comes from a story of an entrustment relationship that the Milan group describes in their collectively written book *Non credere di avere dei diritti* (Don't Think You Have Any Rights, 1987, published in English under the title *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, 1990) and which Cavarero cites in her essay "On the Outskirts of Milan",

where two women meet and become friends through one of the 150-hour schools in Italy. In it, Emilia has the tendency to constantly tell her life story to Amalia, but always in a disorganized and fragmented way. Amalia, who has the capacity to write beautifully, eventually becomes so frustrated with Emilia's repetitive need to tell her story that she writes it out for her as a coherent narrative and gives it to her. Emilia carries the story with her in her purse, reads it daily and weeps over the authority and recognition her friend has given to her life.

**HR:** You might consider kicking off your reading group with one of the activities that Alex developed, in response to the practices of the Milan collective. You remember that exercise in *affidamento* that we carried out in Alex's workshop, where one woman listened to another recount a key relationship of *affidamento* from her life, which the listener then wrote up in what Alex described as a form of a gift?

**GM:** Absolutely! That was one the exercises I related to the Toronto group.

**HR:** We did that last month in the Feminist Duration Reading Group in London, which is the group out of which the Now You Can Go programme emerged, as part of our desire to take these tactics further on an everyday, practised level. It was very powerful, not least for the few men in the group who Alex assigned a different exercise. Instead of writing about their relationship with another woman, they were asked to talk about

two women's relationships with one another. It was initially quite hard for at least one male member, although afterwards he commented that it had a valuable effect of decentring his own male position.

**GM:** The relationship of entrustment that the Milan collective describes is the main interest for our group. The idea of a relationship between two women that not only acknowledges difference or disparity between them, but makes it into a productive and meaningful part of their relationship, seems so radical to me, still. It's especially generative because many of us are engaged in teaching and other forms of mentorship. We're interested in ways of relating to younger, as well as older, women that get outside the horizontal model of "sisterhood" that pervaded 1970s Anglo-American feminism—or at least the story of 1970s feminism many of us have inherited.



*Feeling Backwards, workshop by Nina Wakeford, Raven Row, as part of Now You Can Go, 8 December 2015. Photo: Christian Luebbert*

**HR:** What are the dangers of horizontality?

**GM:** The familiar narratives we hear about this era of feminism, whether they are historically accurate or not (and this is one sub-theme we are interested in as a group) are based on structures of sisterhood that assume an essentializing biological

sameness between women. This model does not recognize differences between women, nor does it allow a consideration of intersectionality or the ways multiple forms of difference and oppression affect women differently. In the book they wrote about their practice, the Milan group is quite clear that they came to entrustment because of the lessons they learned from the failures of horizontality in 1970s American feminism. Older, more experienced women's authority could not be recognized through the model of sisterhood. This created resentment within the group and prevented the transmission of important forms of intergenerational knowledge. What I find so appealing about the practice of entrustment is that it asserts that two women have unique capacities and experiences they can share with one another, and that both play a vital role in giving authority to the other to pursue their desires and goals. There is an onus in this model on seeking out the support of another who has experiences outside your own, and an implicit erotics.

**HR:** As someone who has actively sought out relationships with older, more "experienced" feminists, I appreciate the erotics of this dynamic very well. The question of intersectionality is also one that we are exploring in the Feminist Duration Reading Group. While the group is quite diverse in terms of age and nationality, it's not so in terms of ethnicity or class. It's clear that the core participants and I are in danger of reproducing ourselves in relation to many of our subject positions; hardly

surprising, perhaps, given that the project emerged in an academic art context, with a focus on Italian feminisms. But how to broaden the scope and relevance of the project, without lapsing into tokenism, is something we are thinking through. How are you addressing this in your group?

**GM:** In our planning meetings for EMILIA-AMALIA we are acutely aware of how similar we are to one another, as individual members: for the most part, we are white, cis-gender women. Many of us identify as queer, and we come from a variety of class backgrounds. But it's important to us that we invite people who have experiences and capacities that differ from our own who might be able to activate other overlooked feminist histories that we can cite as a group. The question is how, as organizers, to invite other people to the reading group without tokenizing them.

**HR:** The invitation to participate has to be based on finding common ground for dialogue and exploration. Otherwise it risks being an empty or superficial gesture.

**GM:** Yes, I guess it comes back to a central problem for feminism: how intimately the personal and the political are intertwined. Are you asking someone to participate in the dialogue because of their research area, because of their personal background, or both?

**HR:** One of the most rigorous conversations we had as part of Now You Can Go was unfortunately the event you missed, which was a reading group led by Laura Guy on translation as a feminist practice. We read Gayatri Spivak's "The Politics of Translation" (1993), where she asserts that the translator needs to immerse herself in the language or culture of the original text, what she calls its "rhetoricity". The work of translation, according to Spivak, is about so much more than the literal language: it could be done fast, or it could take a long time. In the text, she's also critical of Western feminists for demanding that she "hurry up" and translate these writings quickly, to satisfy their voracious appetite for the new.

**GM:** EMILIA-AMALIA is making writing a central practice for the group, and is working towards a final publication, which we imagine will take the form of a compilation of reprints of historical texts that have inspired our work, alongside new writing by members who might work to annotate or translate them in the present. Spivak's work could be an important starting point for us.

**HR:** Why do you think we are experiencing this resurgence of interest in feminist thinking and activism and their genealogies?

**GM:** Queer theory and feminism have always been lenses through which I approach my work as a critic, art historian, and curator. But it's only recently that I've begun to turn to feminism as the *object* of my research. I have long been interested in how

people learn to be feminist, or learn to be queer, since these are identities that usually have to be transmitted outside of biological families, across generations. I'm curious about how we can imagine these practices of transmission outside the language of kinship and lineage, which both seem too close to ideas of the family tree or other patriarchal models. The Milan group calls these historical models our "symbolic mothers", which is one way to imagine patterns of influence across generations and geographies. The idea of feminist "waves" is another with which we are familiar. I wonder if there are other genealogies we might trace?



*In or Out: Leaving the Art World and Other Systems, with Gabrielle Moser (introducing, with image by Feminist Art Gallery) and (from left-right) Raju Rage, Karen Di Franco, Karolin Meunier, and Frances Rifkin, The Showroom, as part of Now You Can Go, 12 December 2015. Photo: Helena Reckitt.*



*A Feminist Chorus for Feminist Revolt, a spoken distillation of texts from the Feminist Duration Reading Group, gathered into a score by Lucy Reynolds, The Showroom, as part of Now You Can Go, 12 December 2015. Photo: Ehryn Torrell.*

**HR:** We ourselves are one example of transgenerational feminism, having met when I was a curator at The Power Plant in Toronto, and you were an intern, though we now work together as colleagues.

**GM:** This is exactly the kind of extra-familial relationship I'm invested in. I have learned so much from you, not only about being a curator, but also about being a queer feminist. It's funny that you raise our history as curatorial co-workers—one of the questions I've been thinking about since *Now You Can Go* is how the feminist strategies that the programme explored might pose challenges to traditional curatorial practice. One of the most obvious ways it might do this is to put the stress on relational and durational events, like the ones that comprised the programme. Though I sometimes worry about the trend in curatorial practice towards curators who don't curate exhibitions any more, but organize events in the gallery instead.

**HR:** I think I am becoming one of those curators who doesn't curate exhibitions any more!

**GM:** Me too! Why do you think that is?

**HR:** Part of it is practical: the days of freelance curators sending off exhibition proposals into the blue, and waiting for institutions to accept them, are probably over. In most institutions, curators and directors either want to develop the exhibition programme themselves, or they invite a curator or artist with a specific background to guest curate. However, institutions generally seem to be more responsive to one-off events and programmes, partly because they require less investment of time, finances, and real estate than exhibitions do.

That said, the informality that less visible activities like workshops and reading groups afford can be powerful. Moving away from art as spectacle or performance, they offer the chance for collective exploration and sharing in a more provisional and vulnerable spirit. It's interesting that it was the smaller meetings and workshops—rather than the public panels and talks—that proved to be the most affectively resonant elements of *Now You Can Go* for us both.

**GM:** I have often found this to be the case in my own work. Activities like this have become increasingly important to my curatorial practice over the past three years: events like artist talks, “looking groups”, and performances, which were once considered “public programming”, or supplementary to the main event of the exhibition, are important ways of doing research in public.

**HR:** I still have a concern that mainstream institutions are fine with supporting practices informed by feminism, queer theory, postcolonialism, trans politics, etc., as one-off programmes, but that they aren't prepared to give them sustained financial and infrastructural support. There is the danger that as such they can tick the boxes that show their commitment to “alternative” perspectives, while not investing significantly in them. Moreover, by presenting these practices on a programming

level, but without incorporating their critiques into how they carry out their business behind-the-scenes, institutions talk the talk without walking the walk.

**GM:** Absolutely. I sometimes worry about the politics of this so-called discursive or pedagogical turn in curating. As much as I find these temporary events rich and meaningful spaces for conversation, they don't always produce the same historical records that traditional exhibitions do. Exhibitions leave behind more substantial traces, such as catalogues, that can be vital for transmitting feminist practices and modes of thinking across generations and audiences. As problematic as the "blockbuster" survey exhibitions of feminism often are, such as *elles@pompidou* in Paris or the touring *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, these shows produce lasting documents. If we want to build a lineage of feminist research and citation, these public exhibitions would seem to play an important role in making that possible.

**HR:** But it's not a simple matter of replacing a dominant canon with a feminist one, is it? It's not as if we have a choice whether to accept canons or not. They are imposed on us, and are premised on a problematic market logic of competition that pits artists, regions, media, and generations as well as genders against one another [2] ([\[2\]\\_issue-29-reader/feminist-tactics-of-citation-annotation-and-translation-curatorial-reflections-on-the-now-you-can-go-programme.html#n2](#)). All canons entail

processes of discrimination and classification, inclusion and exclusion. For a previously overlooked or excluded artist or practice to be “added” to an existing tradition can have violent connotations of incorporation, too.

**GM:** Perhaps, though, as a university lecturer, I see the power of providing an alternative or new canon to students. It will never be perfect, but it at least offers something to bat against, and gives researchers, curators, and writers somewhere to begin in the process of citation.

**HR:** I’d like to see a Guerrilla Girls-style survey of where institutions actually put their resources, in terms of solo exhibitions with scholarly catalogues, works added to the permanent collection, and major commissions for women, feminist, non-cis gender, black, and other under-represented artists. Such a study would also need to take on board the infrastructural activities such as fair payment for artists, writers, as well as curators that Working Artists and the Greater Economy (WAGE) are agitating for around artists’ fees and best non-profit practices.

**GM:** This brings me back to the question of creating an historical record of feminist activities, and which stories appear and disappear in our collective archives. I was so pleased to see such thorough documentation of Now You Can Go events through Video in Common (2015), and I wish we had a similar organization in Canada. But in talking with colleagues in

Toronto, several expressed frustration that some components of the programme—such as Nina Wakeford’s “Feeling Backwards” workshop, or Alex’s “Our Future Network”—were not documented. While, to me, it’s obvious why these events weren’t documented, mostly because they entailed very intimate, personal modes of storytelling and (auto)biography, I can also understand the desire to want access to the knowledge that comes from these experiences.



*Intimate Acts: A feminist workshop exploring collective acts of annotation, translation, and recontextualisation, by Kajsa Dahlberg and Laura Guy, The Showroom, as part of Now You Can Go, 13 December 2015. Photo: Helena Reckitt.*

**HR:** I’m working on how to document these events, through disseminating a series of participants’ reports that I have yet to consolidate. Actually the decision to ask Video in Common to film and archive events at The Showroom was taken quite late in the day. The possibility only emerged after a fund I had applied to for speaker travel expenses agreed to support the programme but didn’t cover travel costs. So I asked them to pay for video archiving instead. It was a great decision. Another late decision was to allocate budget for a crèche at The Showroom. It was Emily Pethick, The Showroom’s Director, who raised the issue of childcare. I hadn’t thought it through, which is terrible given the programme’s emphasis on maternal and domestic labour.

Emily's insistence that we think more cohesively about where we put our resources is something that more curatorial projects should take on board.

**GM:** This element of collaboration seemed vital to Now You Can Go's planning, and yet it was an incredibly cohesive programme in its execution. I was remembering recently that, many years ago, you spoke on a panel on curatorial practice and authorship that I chaired where you mentioned finding co-curating difficult. Yet, for this programme, you collaborated curatorially with six other people. How was the experience for you?

**HR:** It's funny you remember this! It's true, I've had some challenging experiences co-curating and in general find it difficult, as it assumes an understanding and shared sensibility that doesn't come easily. For Now You Can Go, the collaboration emerged quite organically and dynamically from an informal interpretive community that had gathered around a shared exploration of Italian feminisms. The six women who developed the programme with me, who included MA and PhD researchers as well as seasoned feminist curators, each brought something that related to their own research or practice—be it ideas for a film screening, speakers, workshop leaders, performers, institutional collaborators, or funding. While I acted as the filter, it was more a case of steering the results of other people's enthusiasm and desire than the traditional curatorial role of inviting and selecting.

**GM:** I think this is what set the programme apart from most academic conferences I attend. The sense that this material mattered to people, and informed their practice in a very direct way, was palpable. It's probably why I found the workshops the most compelling and productive elements. These were the places where the practice of consciousness-raising, or *autocoscienza*, were central, asking participants to engage with readings, with ideas from the past, or with artists' practices, but through their own lived experience: a strategy the Milan Women's Bookstore collective described as "beginning from oneself".

**HR:** There's been a viral quality to how these activities have unfolded. The process started for me almost two years ago when Fulvia Carnevale from Claire Fontaine gave a talk about Italian feminisms as part of an exhibition I curated in Toronto. I found her ideas spellbinding, and their radicalism urgently needed in the light of the co-option and dilution of feminism under "lean-in" rhetorics. I couldn't believe I knew so little about this vital movement, and I wanted to learn more. Fulvia then sent me texts from an issue of *May Revue* she had edited on Italian feminisms, around which I set up a reading group and symposium at Goldsmiths. Those events were so powerful the reading group decided to continue to meet outside academia. From this we developed the Now You Can Go programme, to which Fulvia—as a key figure of *affidamento*, for me—was a keynote speaker. Now Fulvia is editing a follow-up issue of *May*

*Revue* with contributions from these events. The whole thing has come full circle, in a process of mutual contagion and generation, virtually across time and place, as well as through immediate, embodied encounters.

## **Notes**

1 Céline Condorelli, *In Support: A Theoretical and Practical Investigation into Forms of Display*, unpublished PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, London, 2014, p. 17.

2 Angela Dimitrakaki, “Troubling Canons: Exhibiting Women’s and Feminist Art,” Helena Reckitt ed., in *Revisioning the Modernist Art Canon*, ed. Iskin, Ruth E, Routledge, London, forthcoming.

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***Gabrielle Moser*** is a writer and curator based in Toronto. She organises exhibitions and events about photography, spectatorship, and pedagogy, and runs *No Looking After the*

*Internet, an out-loud looking group. She has curated exhibitions for Access Gallery, Gallery TPW, Vtape, and Xpace. Her writing appears in venues including Artforum.com, Art in America, Canadian Art, Fillip, Journal of Visual Culture and Photography & Culture, as well as in numerous books and exhibition catalogues. Her current curatorial research, focused on the theme of Strike/Work, investigates artistic practices of the exaggeration, refusal, and withdrawal of labour as feminist strategies to critique working conditions. She holds a PhD from the art history and visual culture program at York University in Toronto, Canada, and is a lecturer at OCAD University.*

**Helena Reckitt** *is a curator and researcher whose work often explores legacies of queer and feminist art, theory, curating, and activism. She has edited Art and Feminism 2001, Sanja Iveković: Unknown Heroine 2013 and, with Joshua Oppenheimer, Acting on AIDS 1998. Her 2013 essay “Forgotten Relations: Feminist Artists and Relational Aesthetics” appeared in Politics in a Glass Case, edited by Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry. She has held curatorial and programming positions at the ICA, London, Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, Georgia, and The Power Plant, Toronto, and has curated solo exhibitions with artists including Yael Bartana, Keren Cytter, Hew Locke, and Ryan Trecartin (with Jon Davies), and group exhibitions such as What Business Are You In?*

*(2004), Not Quite How I Remember It (2008), and Getting Rid of Ourselves (2014). She is Senior Lecturer in Curating in the Art Department at Goldsmiths, University of London.*