

WOMEN FORWARD

**A Meeting Between
Two Generations of Voices in Art**

An exhibition curated by
Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen and Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen



Texts by Sanne Kofod Olsen, Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen and Ulla
Angkjær Jørgensen. Postscript by Birgitte Kirkhoff Eriksen.

The participating artists are Sine Bang Nielsen, Sarah Browne,
Unni Gjertsen, Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen, Claudia Reinhardt,
Pia Rönicke, Bettina Camilla Vestergaard,
Marie Højlund and Sandra Boss.

WHY THIS EXHIBITION

— the curators in conversation

BIRGITTE EJDRUP KRISTENSEN & ULLA ANGKJÆR JØRGENSEN

WHY THIS EXHIBITION

BEK: We are presenting the exhibition WOMEN FORWARD! because we have discovered a range of highly interesting works that all share a particular trait: a younger woman artist has created a work based on or inspired by a female predecessor. Exploring why these works were created is quite rewarding. What were their reasons? Do all these artists share the same reasons? And what do their works bring to the table? Do they offer new information or insights? Do they enrich art history, or are they operating on different terms? The exhibition makes it possible to discuss the individual works within a wider context, which serves partly to deepen and enhance our experience of them, but also to give the works a well-deserved increase in visibility. An exhibition always generates and focuses attention, which helps imbue the works with additional gravitas and importance. In that sense this exhibition seeks to make a contribution to art history, infusing it with more of what the works themselves indicate is missing: women.

UAJ: Indeed. And the fact that your reply takes the form of so many questions reflects how we want to show that art is also a process of examination and exploration. Today, art works and exhibitions can

constitute a kind of research, but they do so through aesthetic presentations of information. For example, artists might stage a sensuous experience, or embed aspects of the social sphere in art, and in that way they involve spectators in their studies.

BEK: That's right; my answer asks many questions, and the works featured in this exhibition do the same. They turn towards their object, the female predecessor, and ask her, even though she is long dead: "What was it like, being you? Why did you act the way you did? What were your thoughts, ideals, motivations? What obstacles did you face in your time, and how did you address these challenges?" I myself asked questions of this kind in regard to Anna Klindt Sørensen, and I feel that I learned much from doing so. Working with *Anna Klindts 9 Haver* (Anna Klindt's 9 Gardens) gave me the opportunity to gain insight into another human being's life – private and work-related – and into her legacy, i.e. into how our present age treats her, or indeed fails to treat her at all. One of the things I learned is the importance of being aware of the structural obstacles that continue to impede women artists today, and the importance of not only producing art, but also of tending to your art's afterlife and to your own image.

UAI: It's funny that you should mention the concept of image and the level of attention that artists should devote to such aspects of their endeavours, i.e. those that concern them as people, their own persona and how they are perceived. I have just completed two articles about the Danish Surrealist painter Rita Kernn-Larsen, and during my research I came across a statement made by her in a late interview, conducted when she was an old lady and had a brief comeback on the Danish art scene; this was back in the 1990s. She said that she was never interested in publicity. In other words, she had not done enough to promote herself as the author of her works, and she did not take steps to ensure that her works would have a proper afterlife.

Comparing this testimonial to the highly self-aware (male) Surrealist scene of which she was part in the 1930s, when she moved

in international art circles, helps us understand her ‘disappearance’ from art history rather better. This, in turn, may lead us to ponder the mechanisms that govern how history is written. History writing is based on documentation, and documentation must be produced concurrently with events, not afterwards – and it should ideally be presented in a strategic way. The Surrealists were highly active as producers of documentation. They arranged exhibitions, collected each other’s work, wrote about each other’s work, documented their meetings in photographs, took pictures of each other, etc. There were many women in the Surrealist movement, and they were welcomed by their male colleagues, but the men governed the discourse. In much of this documentation women are cast as supporting players to the male main protagonists. In posterity, all this documentation and male self-staging – which generated considerable volumes of archival materials – has formed the point of departure for biographies and art historical analyses that in turn add to the accumulation of archival materials, but always on the basis of pre-existing matter. It is a kind of natural law: in order to write history one must have an archive. Of course, such an archive can be read in new ways, but not even deconstruction, which is looking for the unsaid, can manage without texts. After all, it works by looking between the lines.

My purpose in pointing to Kernn-Larsen as an example is not, of course, to claim that individual artists only have themselves to blame if they are not being remembered as widely as their work merits. Rather, I want to point out that everyone – men and women – perform in accordance with invisible cultural patterns, and the art scene does not stand outside or above this game, neither the practising nor the academic aspects of it. We are all players on this stage, where the game of cultural values is played out in accordance with implicit, unspoken rules. For artists it is all about being seen by the right people, by those who have the cultural capital required to immortalise them. Conversely, art historians who wish to secure recognition and respect

from their colleagues must write about those artists whom the art history community in general considers worthy of canonisation.

HOW DO THE WORKS REACH OUT TO SPECTATORS?

UAJ: I see the method used by you and your colleagues as a way in which predecessors can be activated and made to ‘answer’ questions within a present-day context. One might call the method a virtual historical experiment. It is about reflecting on performativity from a historical perspective, or on how artworks are attributed historical significance (or not!) due to circumstances that reside outside the work itself. For example, in your works involving Anna Klindt Sørensen you incorporated plenty of things that do not usually form part of a conventional understanding of art, making it part of the work. You asked how she and others (including you) treat her work as an artist, and about how all these circumstantial elements influence how the works are received and perceived. With this exhibition we wish to unfurl something similar. We may not answer all the questions, but the truly important part is to ask them.

BEK: In our discussions, we have considered the question of what this reaching out, this message conveyed by the works does to the spectator. When a younger artist asks a question of a predecessor – as Sarah Browne does in her letter to Eileen Gray – the spectator is drawn into an ongoing dialogue, into the engine room of the work, as it were. Spectators have a sense of being directly involved; that the question is also asked of them, and they will inevitably begin to search for answers that will never come quite simply because Eileen is dead. In this sense, the questions remain hanging in the air; they reach out to the artists’ predecessors, but they also reach out to the spectators. One might say that works of art will by their very nature reach out to us because they are intentional: someone (the artist) wants to tell you (the spectator) something. Here, however, the process is rather

more direct: it is conducted via a specific question that also addresses you, or through a staged situation that involves and incorporates your body.

With the works presented in this exhibition, the interesting thing is to look at the specific ways in which such reaching out takes place: the forms of address and the responses they elicit are an essential aspect of several of the works. The artists experiment with different ways of asking. What happens if I ask Eileen Gray how she feels about the fact that her chair has just fetched millions at an auction? Our attention is directed towards Eileen Gray as the person behind the successful designer. Why is this interesting? Why are we interested in the people behind the works, not just the works themselves? In fact, we are not, but we are interested in the invisible mechanisms that only now prompt such reception of her work. We are interested in Eileen Gray as a specific example. What, besides her works, has elevated her to the status she holds today – and why did it not happen back then?

AND THE TITLE?

BEK: The exhibition title **WOMEN FORWARD!** is a reference to Ursula Reuter Christiansen's 1971 painting of that name (property of Statens Museum for Kunst (The National Gallery of Denmark)). There is a dual intention behind the title: partly to point to the endeavours made to bring women forward in art generally, and partly to accentuate the fact that every work featured in the exhibition quite specifically draws forward one or more figures from history. This is an activist title and a descriptive title.

A BRIEF PRESENTATION OF THE WORKS

BETTINA CAMILLA VESTERGAARD (1975-) (DK)
/ ELSA GRESS (1919-1988) (DK)

The work *Andre Strejftog (Other Ventures)* (2015) takes its point of departure in Vestergaard's discovery of a portrait of the writer and social commentator Elsa Gress, painted by her daughter, in the collection owned by the museum KUNSTEN. Vestergaard had not previously been aware of Gress's work, but went on to create a project about her. Among other things, the project gave rise to *Decenter II*: in August 2010 Vestergaard invited a group of contemporary artists to form a temporary artist colony at the Marienborg estate on the island of Møn, the site of Gress's original *Decenter* in the 1970s. Over the course of a four-day workshop the assembled artists considered Gress's ideas, discussing and interpreting their significance in 2010. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, Roskilde, a range of materials documenting the *Decenter II* event forms part of an all-new film work, which is presented as a total installation that incorporates items from Vestergaard's personal archives and those left behind by Elsa Gress.



SARAH BROWNE (1981-) (IE)
/ EILEEN GRAY (1878-1976) (IE):

The works *Carpet for the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Bienale* and *Letter to Eileen Gray* (2009) (and related works) were part of Ireland's contribution to the Venice Biennial in 2010. Browne's overall approach is to identify economic structures as a metaphor for social and political relations, and in connection with her research on Donegal Carpets she came across the designer Eileen Gray and became enthralled by the distinctive beauty of Gray's designs. Seeing a chair designed by Gray sell at € 22 million at an auction prompted Browne to explore how this huge figure correlated to Gray's own ideals about the usage and dissemination of art. The work reaches out to Eileen Gray across time, comprising a freshly produced carpet, a film and a letter from Browne to Gray.



UNNI GJERTSEN (1966-) (NO)
/ MAI ZETTERLING (1925-1994) (SE)

The work *The Mai Zetterling Project* (2005) is about the pioneering Swedish film director Mai Zetterling: in her ground-breaking films she castigated patriarchal society, causing her to become something of a pariah, which meant that she struggled to get funding for her films. The work consists of video projections showing clips from Zetterling's film *Flickorna* (*The Girls*) (1968) intermingled with statements that – greatly in contrast to the legacy produced by her critics at the time – proclaim her success. The version shown at this exhibition is a downsized version featuring three video projections; the original version consisted of five video projections and twelve texts printed on paper.



CLAUDIA REINHARDT (1964-) (DE)
/ DIVERSE KVINDELIGE FORFATTERE M.V.

Based on her own research, Reinhardt uses herself as a model in a range of staged photographic tableaux in *Killing Me Softly* (2004). The images depict the suicides of a number of famous women writers and scientists. The series comprises a total of ten photographs, each 80×100 cm, which relate the stories of Sarah Kane, Unica Zürn, Clara Immerwahr, Sylvia Plath, Adelheid Duvanel, Ingeborg Bachmann, Anne Sexton, Diane Arbus, Pierre Molinier and Karin Boye. In these pictures Reinhardt seeks to imagine their final moments, photographing herself in character as these eminent women. Reinhardt's subjective sympathies and interest in these women's works and lives governed her selection and recreation of the motifs.



PIA RÖNICKE (1974-) (DK)
/ MARIANNE BRANDT (1893-1983) (DE)

The work *Notes on MB* (2014) takes its point of departure in the Bauhaus designer Marianne Brandt. In one of the three films featured in this work, Röncke pans the room in which Marianne Brandt lived during her Bauhaus days from 1927-29. Found and processed materials are hung around the room, the flotsam and jetsam of a designer's work and life. The film emerged out of a series of photographs taken by Marianne Brandt in the studio apartment: in the photographs she reflected the room through a mirror ball, causing the ball to reflect both the room and the artist. Röncke re-enacts this action for the film, placing her body and a circular mirror in the same room, thereby seeking to immerse herself in Brandt's way of viewing the world. How does one do this? In many ways this is the question asked by Röncke's work. The work comprises two films, three screens, a sculpture and a rotating mirror.



SINE BANG NIELSEN (1980-) (DK)
/ KARIN MICHAËLIS (1872-1950) (DK)

For several years now, Bang Nielsen has immersed herself in the writer Karin Michaëlis's life, endeavouring to improve awareness of her humanist ideals and writings. Bang Nielsen has previously sought to represent Michaëlis's strong social conscience in the form of 'a green island' with guest lodgings that boasted various kinds of pickles and preserves; a reference to the writer's private efforts to give humanitarian aid to refugees on Thurø during the interwar years. At this exhibition Bang Nielsen shows the work *Syltesørine* (Pickling Sørine) (2015) which consists of: jam, a film portrait about Karin Michaëlis's home on the island of Thurø, video footage documenting a production of the play *Moder Mod* (Mother Courage) written in co-operation with German director Max Martens; the theme of the play is refugee and immigrant policies considered through the lens of the relationship between Karin Michaëlis and Bertolt Brecht. Bang Nielsen also presents her book *Den grønne ø, Karin Michaëlis' asyl* (The Green Island, Karin Michaëlis's Asylum) about Michaëlis, which includes portraits of some of the many creative artists to whom Michaëlis gave shelter.



BIRGITTE EJDUP KRISTENSEN (1975-) (DK)
/ ANNA KLINDT SØRENSEN (1899-1985) (DK)

With her work *Anna Klindts 9 Haver* (Anna Klindt's Nine Gardens) (2009), Ejdrup Kristensen entered into an ongoing conversation, full of contrasts, with the Danish painter Anna Klindt Sørensen. In a series of installations Ejdrup Kristensen posed as and adopted the persona of Anna Klindt Sørensen, thereby offering a subjective presentation of Klindt Sørensen's life and work. At this exhibition Ejdrup Kristensen picks up on Klindt Sørensen's foundered plans for a museum for women artists in the work *Mit museum* (My museum)(2015), offering a possible take on what a similar initiative for highlighting the work of women artists might look like today. The work, which is a work in progress, involves the writing of Wikipedia articles about women artists who are not yet featured on the site.



MARIE HØJLUND (1979-) (DK) & SANDRA BOSS (1984-) (DK)

For WOMEN FORWARD!, composers Højlund and Boss have created a new performance piece called *Hendes liv blandede sig med mit* (Her Life Entwined with Mine) (2015): an all-new cacophonous sound work. The audio materials used in the work are based on voice recordings created by and featuring the artists presented at the exhibition. The composition consists of the sounds, reverberations, rhythms, pauses and moods that arise in voices depending on their contexts and situations. The various women meet across time and space in this sound work, which forms a fragmented, inconsistent and fragile choir of women's voices.



WHAT HISTORY FORGOT

ULLA ANGKJÆR JØRGENSEN & BIRGITTE EJDRUP KRISTENSEN

We asked the artists about the deliberations prompted by their projects: why and how they selected 'their' particular artists and what they learned during their working processes. A recurring subject in their replies was a concern with the issue of history writing: can it be affected? If so, how? How does one handle the responsibility associated with writing history? Several also point to the complexity inherent in working with historical material, to how this always involves making choices and that such choices are always made on the basis of what you find relevant in the here and now. Concepts such as 'fact' and 'truth' are difficult categories, and the artists are problematising this aspect in various ways. They identify the pitfalls of history writing, framing them as if they were blank spaces waiting to be filled in. Several of the works point to specific examples, to absent or lost information about the first generation of women that formally gained access to education and freedom of speech in public. As is indicated by the works presented in this exhibition, women artists' contributions to art history have been overlooked for many different (yet possibly interconnected) reasons. They challenged the hegemony, they did not fit within existing categories, or perhaps they were quite simply invisible within the frameworks and concepts used to categorise and understand art at the time.

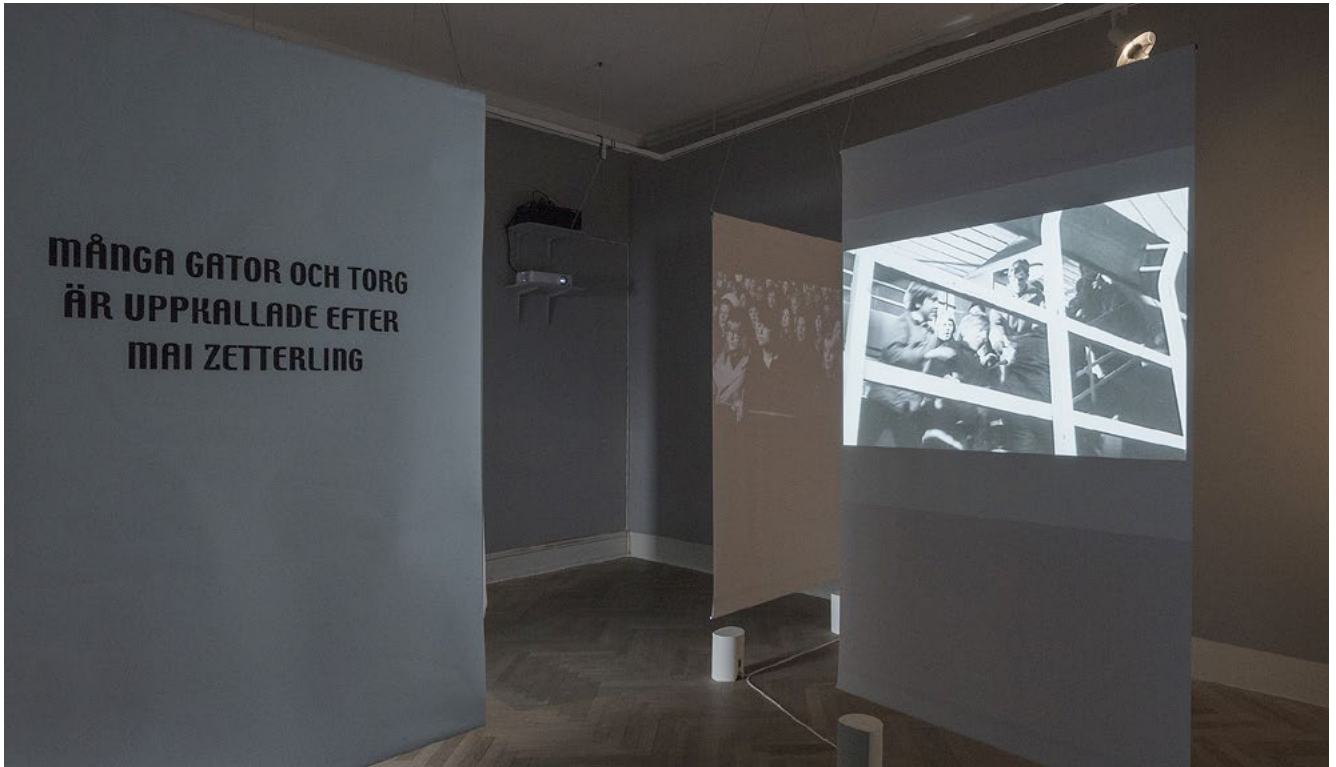


AFFECTING HISTORY

Unni Gjertsen describes her work on The Mai Zetterling Project (2005) as follows:

The project first began as my response to seeing how Mai Zetterling had been marginalised by history. I saw a film by Zetterling on TV (*Älskande par*) (*Loving Couples*); a film that I regarded as brilliant in its own right and also as much more radical than other films from the same period (the mid-1960s), a time when directors such as Ingmar Bergman used the same actors and technical teams. I found it shocking that she was not more universally known and celebrated.

Based on an indignation on behalf of Zetterling, Gjertsen created a project that was intended to change history. She deliberately employed ap-



proaches and devices that are regularly used in accepted history writing by proclaiming Mai Zetterling a genius. She accentuated Zetterling's actions and achievements and called them unsurpassed. And Gjertsen believes that her efforts had the intended effect. While she cannot state with absolute certainty that her exhibition at Konsthall C in Stockholm in 2005 and her claim that "The Mai Zetterling Grant is the greatest accolade you could possibly win in Swedish cinema" are the only reasons why the Mai Zetterling Grant was founded back then, in 2005, she still believes that the fact that the grant was instigated immediately after her exhibition is quite a telling coincidence. She uses her example to point to how you can make a difference by nudging history; that history remains open to negotiation.



EMPATHY AND FICTION

Another possible strategy used by the women artists in the exhibition is empathy: to put oneself in someone else's place. In Claudia Reinhardt's photo project *Killing Me Softly* (2004) the artist has inserted herself in tableaux re-enacting the suicides of ten women artists. The method offers one way of approaching history's blind spots. Reinhardt says:

In the (...) photos I tried to imagine their last moment and photographed myself in the roles of these personalities. My subjective sympathies and my interest in the work and biographies of the artists determined the selection of the particular death scenes recreated. What was important was the staging of these photos, not at all an authentic depiction of the act itself, but rather the personal creation of a legend, one based on bygone legends.



In the photographs Reinhardt shows us how she imagines the death scenes, for of course we do not know what they were truly like. No archival materials exist to tell us what these artists' final moments were like and what they were thinking at the end. Reinhardt explains: "I tried to slip into their skin, or better, to pull their skin over my own body." Her statement is interesting because it pinpoints one of the common themes of the contributions to this exhibition. Several of the artists seek to identify with the objects of their study by physically putting themselves in their place, following their tracks, putting themselves in situations and in places that their chosen artists had previously been in. They use this approach as a method that might help them to notice something new; something that has hitherto been overlooked and which may yield new information about the deceased artist and her context.



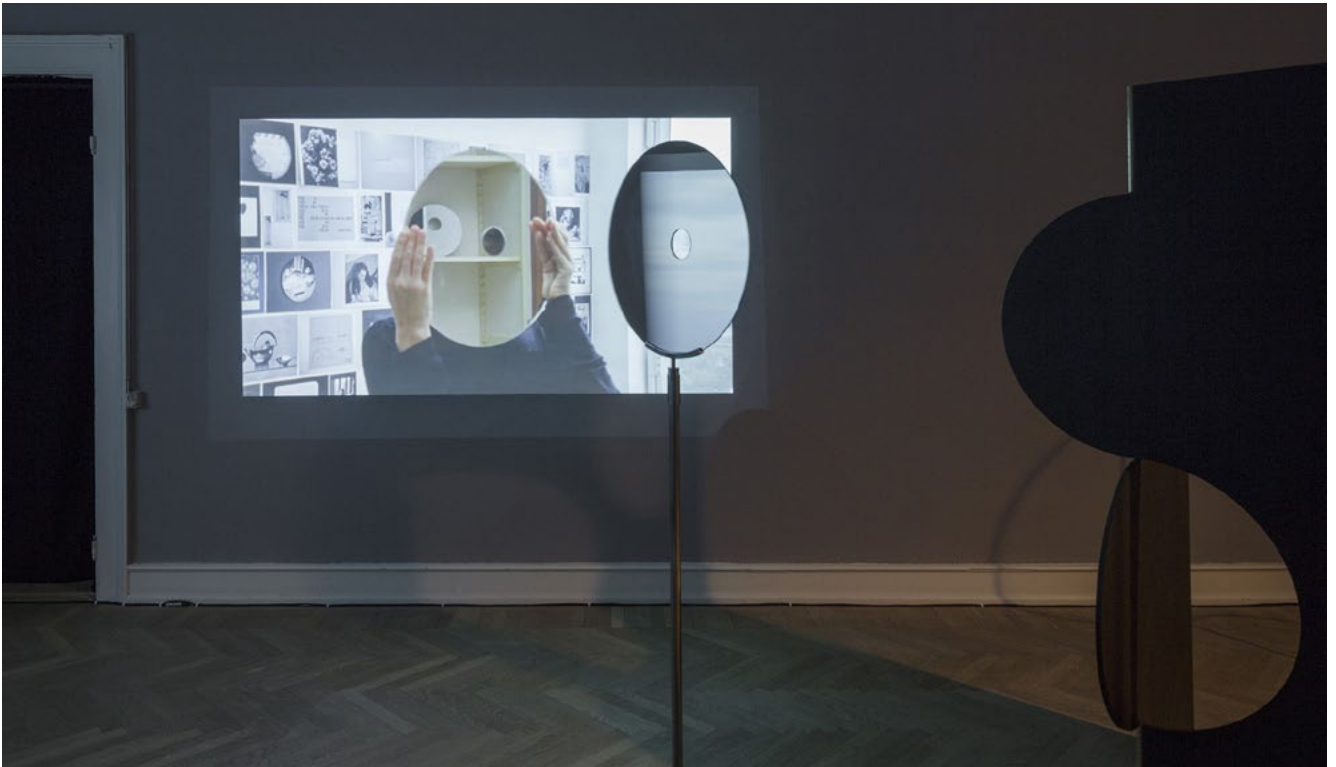
The artists see themselves reflected in – or identify with – their objects of study. Reinhardt does so in a very empathic, immersive way, while Röncke uses a more distanced, analytical approach when she speaks about “maintaining movable boundaries between the subject of the biography and the narrator”. Reinhardt’s project was first prompted by hearing about the suicide of the British playwright Sarah Kane (1971–99): “Her death came as a shock to me. I had only just noticed her work few months before and had been deeply impressed and affected by her writings. I couldn’t get her death out of my mind. I realised that many other female artists who have been important to me, my work and my life, committed suicide as well. I had to deal with that and I began with this series”. By positing herself in fictitious scenes, she puts herself in these women’s places while also seeking to make the situations and the stories behind them perceptible to the rest of us.



THE BLIND SPOTS OF HISTORY

Rönicke has been interested in Marianne Brandt's gaze – quite literally so. She takes her point of departure in a number of photographs taken by Brandt in her studio apartment at Bauhaus Dessau in 1928. In these pictures Brandt photographs the room and herself reflected in a mirror ball. Rönicke has scrutinised Brandt's notes, sketches and photographs from a range of archives in an effort to achieve a closer understanding of and insight into her mindset and the circumstances surrounding her work. Brandt documented and noted her own presence in this workspace, and so Rönicke too makes this room her starting point. She places herself in the blind spot.

I have been thinking a lot about what Christa Wolf calls THE BLIND SPOT. And what it means to speak from the blind spot (not towards it or around it). My experiment aimed at stepping into M.B.'s gaze



(the blind spot), and to point the camera towards the room, in a 360-degree pan, in close scrutiny. I must insist that M.B.'s gaze is unknown to us. We do not know what it means to see the world through this gaze (this is true in history, too). I am seeking to give material form to some of the co-ordinates set up by M.B.'s work and thinking, stepping into that space anew, working and thinking while using that which was not available in the past.

Notes on M.B. is about states of crisis, depression and disappearance, about no longer being visible, able to make a clear stand – partly due to external circumstances and partly due to deliberate, binding choices. It is about moving towards something invisible and about looking out at the world from that position, from the blind spot. Röncke presents historical spaces reflected through the eyes and writings of Brandt. Brandt's



personal crisis coincides with the Depression era of the late 1920s, the Nazis' rise to power in the 1930s, the Second World War as the culmination of it all – followed by the years in the DDR.

Brandt created a wide range of the most important metal objects (lamps, teapots, coffee pots) designed at Bauhaus during the period 1924–29, but she never took out copyright on any of her designs. For this reason she never received any commission fee when the objects were subsequently reproduced.

CATEGORIES AND EXCLUSION

Unni Gjertsen also went hunting through archives in her search for knowledge about Mai Zetterling. During her search she discovered a



somewhat surprising fact: that the radical left-wing forces who took over and became the film establishment in Sweden in the 1960s demanded a particular kind of radical aesthetic, and Zetterling did not fit this mould. Zetterling was heavily criticised for her film *Flickorna* (The Girls) (1968) in Sweden, and 18 years would pass before she received new funding to produce films in Sweden. The fact that Zetterling's film did not match the prevalent tastes is quite surprising to present-day observers, for *Flickorna* is actually highly radical in terms of its cinematic style, which has a modernist approach infused by free flows, discontinuities, scenes from everyday life and sexuality. It is equally radical in terms of its content: gender roles are discussed throughout the entire film. However, this combination of a radical approach to cinematic style and political feminist messages apparently did not find favour with those who held sway in the general discussions on film at this time in Sweden.



Elsa Gress is another example of a deceased artist whose work falls outside the perimeters of prevalent literary and art-historical narratives. Bettina Camilla Vestergaard discovered this fact when she happened to come across a portrait of Elsa Gress in the collections at the museum KUNSTEN; a portrait that made her curious to know more about Gress. As Vestergaard says, Gress is featured in literary history, but the creative activities at her artist collective Decenter at Marienborg on the island of Møn in the 1970s have never been written into art history: “Few traces now exist – in the landscape or in archives – of the fruitful artistic community at Marienborg. This is rather surprising, for in many ways the place and its inhabitants had a real impact on society’s norms at the time; they offer an original narrative within the collective memory of our society.” Decenter was a place where artists and intellectuals



met and took part in a range of happenings, performances and creative activities. About her work with Gress, Vestergaard says that her intention is to re-inscribe Gress in our common history, but on Gress's own terms. She also states that her approach is subjective, intuitive and non-linear, entirely in keeping with Gress's own reluctance to categorise her thoughts and actions. And Vestergaard concludes that:

Perhaps this reluctance was the reason why she has not been awarded a more prominent place in history –she evaded categorisation. During my research I have read how others have described her, and I have been told that she was a woman of superior intellect, bizarre appearance, and a keen unwillingness to live like the average person – and that she has been called witch, amazon, virago and Denmark's Only Angry Young Man.





Instead, Vestergaard focuses on the journey and on encountering the unknown, an act which, according to her, contains a sense of poetry and love of life that touches upon something more existential in Gress's work. In this sense she offers an alternative reading of Gress.

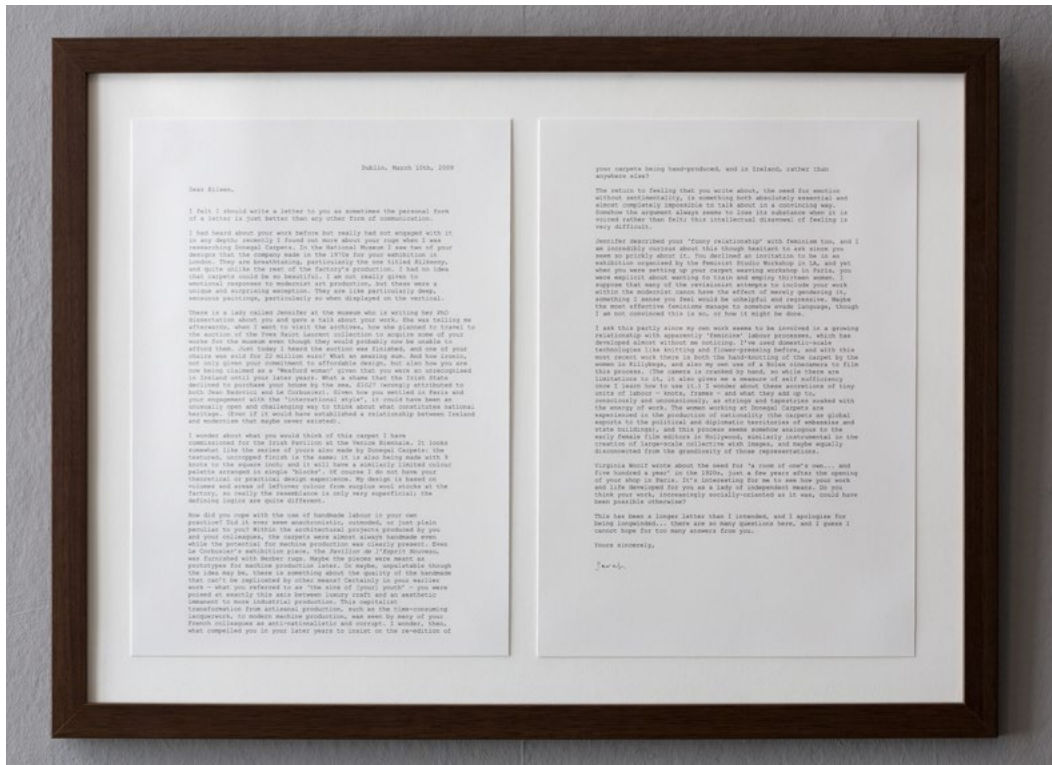
Sine Bang Nielsen also bases her work on Karin Michaëlis on actions taken by Michaëlis that were not described in literary history, but nevertheless were quite natural continuations of her literary humanist work: Michaëlis offered shelter to political refugees in her home on Thuro during the 1930s and 1940s. However, Bang Nielsen highlights the fact that she found surprises during her studies: "I was surprised to see that Michaëlis's domestic side: her jams and preserves – her highly domestic vein of humanism – was often being denigrated in literary contexts. I was taken aback by seeing that presenting her as a motherly woman



could serve to ridicule her work as a humanist and writer.” In Michaëlis’s case we see quite explicitly that foregrounding herself as a woman and mother meant that she became marginalised as a writer in the eyes of the powers that be.

REPRESENTATION AND INVISIBILITY

When Sarah Browne was asked to represent Ireland at the Venice Biennial in 2009, this prompted her to reflect on what it means to represent a nation. What and who is represented, and how does the national aspect enter the picture? She chose to collaborate with the carpet manufacturer Donegal Carpets in Killybegs in north-western Ireland; a company well known for making traditional, hand-knotted, customised carpets and rugs for official buildings such as Irish embassies as well as important residenc-



es abroad such as Buckingham Palace and The White House. From 1896 all the way up to 2003, all production took place in Killybegs, at which point all hand-knotted production was relocated to Asia, while industrial production of custom carpets continued in Killybegs. Browne wished to explore this tradition of craftsmanship in the nation's service. While conducting her research for the project, she discovered that the designer Eileen Gray had had carpets made at the factory, and this fact had a crucial impact on the direction taken by the project. She describes it as follows:

The intention through this work was to establish a series of correspondences between a series of women who were all somehow tasked or concerned with questions of national representation, but at the same time rather marginal or minor characters, peripheral



or invisible to that representation. The women working in the Killybegs carpet factory never had the opportunity to see the fruits of their labour in situ. In this I include myself as a young artist selected to “represent” my country, Alana Keaney and Helena Campbell, the carpet knotters, and Eileen Gray, (...) gaining recognition for her work again only in her later years.

Browne hired two former weavers to make a carpet that is reminiscent of Eileen Gray’s design, but not a replica: “While seeming to recall certain modernist designs, or perhaps to reference Eileen Gray, the design and colour choice was actually dictated by the decision to work only from the surplus wool stocks remaining at the factory,” she says. Browne draws attention to the relationship between economics – in this case the invisible, but very concrete female labour, the hands and hours put into

the work – and representation, i.e. the visible, symbolic works that are scattered around the world and come to represent Ireland as a nation. The question of what and who is represented by this nameless craft, by the labour force and resources of a country, takes on key importance.

Just as Pia Rönicke's work is not about Marianne Brandt as a person, the work series *Carpet for the Irish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale* (2009), *One Hour's Knotting in One Hour's Drawing* (16 knots per square inch) (2009), *One Hour's Knotting in One Hour's Drawing* (9 knots per square inch) (2009) and *Letter to Eileen Gray* (2009) is not about Eileen Gray as a person or about her modernist legacy. Rather, in this work Gray acts as a prism, thereby allowing us to see, understand and study questions about the mechanisms of history that make things invisible.

REACHING OUT

All of the works featured in the exhibition employ some version of a dialogue-based method, one that sees the present-day artist reaching out to a deceased artist from the past. When spectators stand before the works, the questions asked as part of this dialogue serve as interactions connecting the spectator and the work. The work becomes a 'semi-subject', actively seeking to involve the spectator in its historical and democratic project: Who and what is represented in history, and who and what is not? And in what way does this affect how we see ourselves and the times we live in? The exhibition presents and examines this method within the context of contemporary art and also sheds light on the lives and careers of the women by exploring and analysing the links between artistic success, gender identity, and historical and geographical contexts.



DAUGHTERS OF DECONSTRUCTION

ULLA ANGKJÆR JØRGENSEN

Le philosophe est un père et pas une mère.
Jacques Derrida.

According to the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, philosophy is a father figure, not a mother figure. He made this statement in an interview with film directors Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, conducted for their documentary *Derrida* (2002) about him. In the film they ask him very directly which female philosopher he would consider his philosophical mother. Derrida, usually never at a loss for words, needs to think a little before he proceeds. He begins to reply in English, but finds himself needing to change to his mother tongue, French: “My mother could not be a philosopher,” he says, “to me the philosophical figure will always be masculine. That is why I have deconstructed philosophy. (...) There is something wrong about a thinking mother. That is what I love, and what I am constantly trying to create.” Continuing his answer, Derrida goes on to say that for him, the only possible female philosopher-mother would be his son’s daughter; someone who comes after him and so becomes a daughter of deconstruction. Of course there have been female philosophers. We know, for example, of Simone de Beauvoir and Hannah Arendt, but philosophy as a system has been envisioned from a male position. Derrida speaks of that system when he speaks about how

philosophy is gendered. The logic of Western philosophy marginalises the female thinker. The tradition of philosophy is quite simply male by nature; we cannot change that, but we can change philosophy for the future. Derrida is interested in the future, in the potential and promise inherent in its pregnant condition. Deconstruction is not about tearing down everything from the past, but about identifying the flaws of the system, its weak points, the places where its logic fails and where something has been left out in order to let something else be accentuated.

This also holds true of art history. The tradition it encompasses is male, and we cannot change that. Also, the artist figure is traditionally a man. Of course, many feminists have pondered and prodded this fact, and in the 1970s they mobilised the vast, interdisciplinary Her-Story project; an initiative that spanned many activities, including the exhibition *Women Artists 1550–1950* curated by the American art historians Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin in 1976. (Harris & Nochlin 1981) They rediscovered many forgotten female artists, returning them to the public eye. Since then much has been written about the women artists that history forgot, and there remains much work still to do. However, it will never be possible to achieve historical equality, quite simply because social and economic factors meant that, all the way into the 20th century in Europe, women could not unfold their artistic talents to the extent that men could. It will never be possible to dig out as many women from the archives as there are men, to award women retrospective equality – for the simple reason that the artistic potential, however great or small, of the majority of women of the past was never fully realised. This is to say that we will never see as many women as men featured in art historical collections at museums.

Even though many women artists have been added to the roster, this does not change the way art history is structured: there is something irreversible about how history has already been told, embedding itself in the self-image and self-awareness of our culture. Even though Mary

Cassatt (1844–1926) and Berthe Morisot (1841–95) have by now become staples in retellings of the story of Impressionism in France, this does not change the fact that the overall project of Impressionism was defined by men and that our present-day understanding of Impressionism is defined by a male outlook on the world. But we can, like the British art historian Griselda Pollock, opt for ‘differencing the canon.’ (Pollock 1999). We can choose to unlock the canon and decide that in our re-readings of history, Cassatt and Morisot must play a part. We can decide that we wish to understand how their view of the world, as filtered through Impressionism, appears different from that of their male colleagues. We can own up to the fact that gender makes a difference, but that this difference will in turn vary depending on the periods, social classes and ethnic groupings involved.

The artists featured in this exhibition enter into negotiations with the patriarchal structure of art history as they unearth foremothers that were hitherto unknown to them. Their motivations for doing so may be different, but they all insist on the paradoxical project of trying to cast a woman as their art-historical father figure. Their point of departure is this: back in annals of history there was a woman who was in my place. In a way this reflects an admission of how women remain different today. The difference can be quantified in simple numbers today, but these figures should be understood within a wider historical framework. Within the last decade, Denmark has seen an increasing focus on the gender imbalance evident in Danish museums. Many have expressed considerable wonder at seeing that works by women artists are still insufficiently represented in Danish museums today, after 100 years of gender equality struggle and in an age where women artists are educated on an equal footing with men. The matter was recently taken up for assessment by art historian Hans Dam Christensen, who arrives at the conclusion that the problem is structural in nature and that the museums obscure their acquisition policies behind a non-specific concept of ‘quality’. Museum directors always refer to how they buy works of art based only on their

quality, but, as Dam Christensen wryly notes, this must mean that women artists today do not produce work of sufficiently high artistic quality – for their works are not being bought, even though they produce approximately the same quantity of works as their male counterparts. (Christensen 2014)

The artists featured in this exhibition attack the issue from a deconstructivist perspective: they reveal what art history has left out. Unni Gjertsen says that she wishes to point to the film director Mai Zetterling as being the equal of any male genius. She does this as an act of defiance, and she believes that this strategy works. However, in doing so she also points to one of the inherent problems of the system: that historically the artist-genius is a masculine figure. Derrida would say that it is impossible to imagine the genius as a woman. The American writer Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) had arrived at the same realisation when she presented herself as a male artist/genius figure in her pre-war Saturday salons in Paris. In order to achieve genius status, she had to engage in a queer performance; she had to play the part of a man, adopting a masculine persona. She dressed in manly clothes and engaged in masculine social behaviours, evident in her overall demeanour and in the way in which she led the conversation at her Saturday salons. (Elliot and Wallace 1994)

The fact that the artist figure is traditionally a man has a definite impact on how the role of the artist is identified today and on what motifs are considered legitimate subjects for artistic treatment. Some find the act of considering and interpreting art from a gender perspective problematic, but the fact remains that women artists have always been subjected to that particular gaze. Their sex has always been used against or for them in reviews and references, inevitably appearing as a factor charged with significance, even when the women artists themselves did not believe that there was anything gender specific about their art. We cannot simply ignore this; reception has become an inescapable part of the history of these works and artists. As Simone de Beauvoir said, culture will always drag the woman's gender to the fore; her body is always

in the foreground. The Danish writer Elsa Gress (1919–88) experienced this quite harshly – as Bettina Camilla Vestergaard discovered when she delved deeper into Gress’s writings. Gress’s gender hit her like a boomerang. It was said of her that yes, she may have a superior intellect, but she was also lumbered with a bizarre appearance and an inability to live like most people, and she has been called names such as witch, amazon, shrew and Denmark’s only ‘Angry Young Man’. Obviously, a thinking woman was hard to stomach for many even as recently as in Gress’s day.

So even though many artists have declined being labelled by their gender, and continue to do so today, there is no escaping it. The women involved in the Modernist movement in particular did not wish to be called ‘women’ artists, which is perfectly understandable in light of the Modernist ethos of universality. However, the problem is that in spite of the intentions behind modernist aesthetics, the general interest in women artists has always been about how women might contribute difference. Male fellow artists, commentators and critics have been interested in how women could contribute something new as a result of being different. And women have fought against being determined and generalised against due to their sex. Nevertheless, the cultural frameworks through which we understand art have always perceived women’s presence through a gendered lens, as difference. It is a cultural construct that is undergoing negotiation and possibly transformation, but it remains in effect.

There is a paradox embedded in the art sphere: art is supposedly free, unfettered and objective, but is in fact governed by conventions that are handed down from one generation to the next, imperceptibly defining what quality is. Sine Bang Nielsen made a discovery while studying the writer Karin Michaëlis: she found out that Michaëlis’s maternal traits, for example the fact that she made preserves for her refugees, were used against her, adversely affecting assessments of her writings. She was cast as a somewhat ridiculous character. This indicates that at this point in history, merging the sphere of women’s lives and the sphere of art was loaded with problems. Even though we may believe that this

has changed today, we still find a certain reluctance to mix art and the women's sphere, to clearly manifest a difference. This was certainly the conclusion reached by the Norwegian literary historian Christine Hamm in her studies of Norwegian women writers writing about single mothers. According to Hamm's analysis, the reception of such novels avoided this theme altogether, focusing exclusively on questions of form. Hamm wonders what is considered unsuitable or wrong about speaking of motherhood – and, in our present day and age, single mothers – in art? Why should this be taboo, rendered invisible by the talk of form? (Hamm 2013). What is supposedly wrong about speaking about this female difference, this women's issue, addressed by women? Why is that not interesting? If we turn our attention to the visual arts we find that only few contemporary artists have addressed the subject of motherhood, especially when one considers how much energy and time it accounts for in women's lives. The exception that proves the rule would be the American artist Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), and in the 1970s the Danish artist Kirsten Justesen created works that addressed motherhood and life as a housewife.

A few years ago I went on a summer excursion to an art museum outside of Copenhagen. Here I heard an exchange between two elderly ladies that has stuck with me ever since. I was perusing an exhibition – the exact nature of which escapes me today, but it had a 19th century theme – when I suddenly heard one of the ladies say to the other: "Where are the women?" After this I have often thought that plenty of female visitors must ask themselves that very question when they visit art museums. These women were all born in the 20th century, have enjoyed the right to vote and the opportunities to have an education. Most are aware of and support the women's movement, and demographically women over forty are the most frequent museumgoers of all. Even though there may be perfectly valid art historical reasons why it is not possible to ensure 50% representation for women, it also remains true that women artists did in fact exist in Danish art history throughout

most of the timeframe that is mainly addressed by art museums in Denmark: the years after 1800. And women have always been represented as subject matter in art. Viewing art history from a gender perspective is not just about reinstating overlooked artists in their proper place. It is just as much about adopting a critical, reflective view of the stories we tell. How can we avoid reproducing stale and obsolete narratives about 'women artists' when studying Modernism? Should we not take a critical view of the masculine artist's role at the same time? And perhaps, as suggested by Sarah Browne in her work about Irish national representation and the factory Donegal Carpets, it might even prove fruitful to consider the question of women and men in art in terms of class, nationality and production perspectives.

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WOMEN FORWARD!

SANNE KOFOD OLSEN

The year 2015 is a year for celebrating equality in Denmark: it marks the 100th anniversary of the introduction of women's suffrage in Denmark. The change was made as part of an extensive amendment to the Danish constitution in 1915, and women were not the only ones to get the vote: the right to vote was also extended to less affluent citizens than before, allowing everyone to contribute to the democratic process. This watershed moment also marked the official beginning of an equality project, rich in scope and perspective that has now lasted for a century.

What impact has this had on the arts? At the time of writing (in the spring of 2015) we have seen renewed discussion on the subject of equality on the art scene; for example, women artists have asked why museums still acquire more works by male artists than female ones. A reasonable question, and one that takes a critical look at the current conditions of gender equality on the art scene. The Museum of Contemporary Art can, however, take some pride in the fact that its collection, built over the course of the last 25 years, boasts an almost even split between men and women.

Indeed, my decision – made in 2013 in my capacity as then-director of the Museum of Contemporary Art – to launch a collaboration with artist Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen and art historian Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen on the exhibition WOMEN FORWARD! was not based on any inten-

tion to launch a critique of gender-based inequality. Rather, the primary objective of this exhibition was to celebrate a landmark year for equality and to focus on women artists of the past and present.

The general focus on women artists and questions of equality when comparing women artists and their male counterparts grew greatly in scope in the 1970s, a time when feminist artists began to address the issue. The right and opportunity to be both artist and woman was a key concern, and back then the issue was – to a greater degree than is the case today – closely associated with a general women's liberation movement that was intimately linked to the question of women's access to the labour market. At the same time, some of the work done by feminist artists from this era was concerned with rewriting art history. The 1970s saw the publication of numerous books, based on art historical studies, about women artists from the Renaissance (1550) up to the present day. The books demonstrated that the past had in fact boasted numerous celebrated female artists, even as far back as the 16th century, but that many of these artists had been forgotten as history was written.

A few years ago I was writing a small text about women artists of Danish Modernism, and on that occasion I carried out a little research that led me to the same conclusion. Danish women artists who had been active from the 1920s up until their deaths had also been forgotten or partly forgotten by art history, even though they had enjoyed great acclaim in their own day, receiving Academy medals and being the subjects of retrospectives, major newspaper interviews, etc. Examples included the artists Ebba Carstensen, Astrid Holm, Franciska Clausen and Anna Klindt Sørensen, whose bodies of work were significant and important, and who had all been greatly influenced by international movements in their art.

Anna Klindt Sørensen constitutes a joint starting point for this exhibition: the artist and curator Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen has worked with the life and art of Anna Klindt Sørensen in her own art for many years now. Her dialogic project brings together contemporary art and art history, staging a dual-sided feminist project: a kind of empowerment of present-

day women artists on the one hand and, on the other hand, a study of and focus on women artists of the past. This approach serves as the fundamental method underpinning the exhibition WOMEN FORWARD! – the artists featured here were selected on the basis of their artistic work with and interest in one or more women artists from the past. Sine Bang Nielsen concerns herself with the poet Karin Michaëlis (1872–1950), Sarah Browne with the designer and architect Eileen Gray (1878–1976), Unni Gjertsen with the Swedish actress and director Mai Zetterling (1925–94), Claudia Reinhardt with a range of women artists from history who all committed suicide, Pia Röncke works with Marianne Brandt, and Bettina Camilla Vestergaard addresses Elsa Gress (1919–88). Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen herself continues her work with Anna Klindt Sørensen (1899–1985).

With this move, the exhibition ventures beyond the realm of contemporary art into a field of criss-crossing influences where spiritual meetings between different artists across generations sheds new light on complex territory; a move that involves raising the profile of women artists of the past as well as asserting the position of present-day women artists as equals on the art scene and in society as such. These meetings take place in the visual, language-based and performance-based works that form the nucleus of the exhibition.

Thus, the exhibition WOMEN FORWARD! celebrates equality in the realm of art and in society in general.

POSTSCRIPT

It gives the Museum of Contemporary Art great pleasure to present the exhibition **WOMEN FORWARD!** *A Meeting Between Two Generations of Voices in Art* on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage in Denmark.

A century has gone by since Danish women won the right to vote in 1915, but the topic remains as relevant as ever. For this is not just about how women got the opportunity to take part in political decision-making, thereby voicing their opinions; it is also about women being recognised as citizens of equal value as men: about their voices and contributions being acknowledged as important.

Now, in 2015, we should not just commemorate and celebrate the victory won after 25 years of struggle in 1915; we must also remember the importance of continued study, discussion and consideration of women's position and visibility in society – within the political, social and cultural spheres.

Art offers a space where social issues, cultural phenomena and gender-related topics can be turned and twisted any way you want, and where all questions are welcome. This makes museums ideal venues for ongoing studies and discussions of women's role in culture and in society.

The exhibition **WOMAN FORWARD!** homes in on women's position and visibility in art and in general. It was jointly curated by the artist Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen and the art historian Ulla Angkjær Jørgensen. They got the idea for the exhibition when they noticed a tendency

amongst contemporary women artists: many worked with women artists from the past in their own works and artistic practices. The works on display were created by seven contemporary women artists, each of whom has entered into artistic conversations with one or more dead predecessors and their lives, thoughts and works. One of the questions they ask is whether women artists have been properly seen and heard throughout the last 100 years.

The museum wishes to thank the artists Sine Bang Nielsen, Sarah Browne, Unni Gjertsen, Birgitte Ejdrup Kristensen, Claudia Reinhardt, Pia Rönicke and Bettina Camilla Vestergaard for their great commitment and contributions to the exhibition, and also to thank all those who have loaned works for the show. Warm thanks are extended to the two curators and to everyone else who have contributed to the realisation of this exhibition. Their number includes the museum's former director, Sanne Kofod Olsen, as well as museum staff members Helen Nishijo Andersen, Enrico Passetti, Helene Johanne Christensen and Dea Thune Antonsen. Special thanks are also due to the foundations that have sponsored the exhibition; without such support the exhibition could not have been realised: Roskilde Kommunes Kulturpulje, The Danish Arts Foundation, Kulturkontakt Nord, OCA: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, The Knud Højgaard Foundation, The Jyllands-Posten Foundation, and Oda og Hans Svenningsens Fond.

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PHOTO CREDITS, PORTRAITS

Living artists:

Sarah Browne, p. 9, photographer Floortje Robertson
Unni Gjertsen, p. 10, photographer Ina Åsheim
Pia Rönicke, p. 12, Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi
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Sine Bang Nielsen, p. 13, photographer Tim K Jensen

Older generation of artists:

Elsa Gress, p. 8, archive photo unknown photographer
Eileen Gray, p. 9, <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/eileen-gray-thoroughly-modern-maker-1.2015801>
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