

POSING AS A CATALOGUE, ACTING LIKE AN ARTISTS' BOOK: *KÜNSTLERINNEN INTERNATIONAL 1877–1977*

ABSTRACT — The 1970s were a heyday for artists' publications. While artists' books were regarded as allowing for a more democratic and dynamic circulation of art, the traditional medium of art communication, the exhibition catalogue, also took on new forms. In 1977 Berlin, a group of artists and activists collaborated at the intersection of both: on the occasion of a major exhibition on artist-women, they created a publication that at first sight complied with the codes of a catalogue but upon closer examination mobilized it for feminist purposes. Through the self-reflexive articulation of its production process and the aesthetic disruption of its content, the catalogue makers pointed to the social and cultural fabrication of art histories. *Künstlerinnen international*, posing as a catalogue and acting as an artists' book, was able to attract and educate people from various backgrounds—thus realizing the subversive impetus of the latter by building on the popularity of the former.

— In 1976, the U.S. art critic Lucy Lippard dared to dream: “I have this vision of feminist artists' books in school libraries (or being passed around under the desks), in hairdressers, in gynecologists' waiting rooms. . .” (Lippard et al. 1976/1977: 10). In short, she wished them to be both as appealing and as ordinary as “Girl Scout Cookies” (ibid.). Some months later, she travelled to Berlin, and there, I will argue, her fantasy came true—at least as far as the cookie part is concerned.

— Lippard traveled to Germany at the invitation of seven women who in 1977 organized the exhibition “Künstlerinnen international 1877–1977.”¹⁾ According to the press, this group was well off in the “cookie business”: Italian art critic Lea Vergine called them “a group of girl scouts”²⁾ (Vergine 1977: 38) and was joined by German journalist Margarete von Schwarzkopf who found them selling “cookies” to the “women's front” (Von Schwarzkopf 1977). However, what is so telling about these reviews and what connects them to Lippard's vision is not their vocabulary. Rather, their mere existence hints at what indeed made it possible to lend the show's catalogue the same appeal as hot cookies straight from the oven. The fact that “Künstlerinnen international” was not only reviewed by major German newspapers but even attracted (or, in the case of Vergine, repelled) an international audience was an effect of its pompous conception.

— From March to April 1977, the exhibition took place at three locations in Berlin, one of them Charlottenburg Palace,³⁾ a historical

1)

In the following, I refer to the exhibition as “Künstlerinnen international” and the accompanying publication as *Künstlerinnen international*.

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All translations from German or, as in this case, Italian into English are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

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The other two venues were also located in the west of the city: performances, videos, slides and photographs were shown in an exhibition space of the art library on Jebensstraße, while a documentary photographic project by artists Gerhild Liebenberg and Marianne Wex on gendered body language was exhibited in the spaces of the neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (New Society for Visual Art, in the following: nGbK) on Hardenbergstraße, see the press release of the group from March 7, 1977, available on the website of the nGbK: https://ngbk.de/media/pages/media/3cb2487cc8-1715521911/kunstlerinnen_international_1877-1977_1977_presse-text_00566.pdf (accessed June 17, 2026). Both venues offered less space than the Orangery of Charlottenburg Palace and had shorter opening hours; for instance, they were both closed on Sundays. This led contemporary critics to suspect an implicit hierarchy from the part of the curators: Cillie Rentmeister considered it no coincidence that works that challenged norms of the art market were “hidden” (Rentmeister 1977: 54) in the less “representative” (ibid.: 52) exhibition sites (see also Behrens 1991: 83–84). Irrespective of the curators' intentions, these sites clearly received less attention, with many press articles failing to mention them at all.

building with whitewashed walls and high ceilings that housed the main part of the show. The curators chose around 150 artist-women⁴⁾ to exhibit on an area of more than 1,000 square meters. Among them were many names that nowadays still do not compete with the art market's top sellers but have since received profound scholarly attention, including Helen Frankenthaler, Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Eva Hesse, Frida Kahlo, Natalia Goncharova, Hannah Höch, Marie Toyen, Sonia Delaunay, Maria Lassnig, Suzanne Valadon, Joan Mitchell, Anna Oppermann, and many, many more. The curators had 100,000 Deutschmarks at their disposal (Schor 2015: 481) and spent three years on preparing the show (Kaiser 2013, Buschmann 2009, Behrens 1991).⁵⁾ To them, "starting small" (Bierther et al. 1977: 1) was not an option. This longing for grandiosity also manifested itself in the show's catalogue: not restricting itself to the exhibited works, it expanded the selection to 265 artists and their works on 370 well-filled pages.

— At first glance, the rather opulent format of both the exhibition and the catalogue seems to be at odds with Lippard's vision of artists' books as mundane objects spreading feminist thought. Wasn't the art critic thinking of ways to circumvent the institutional constraints of the art world when sketching her little utopia (Lippard et al. 1976/1977: 10)? And doesn't the Berlin project seem to be all too well integrated in that very cosmos? Lippard's take on artists' books was part of a now canonical issue of *Art-Rite*, published a few months before the Berlin show opened. The magazine shared 50 statements on artists' books that it had collected from the art world. Artists, editors, writers, and librarians responded to its call for writing "something informal, but brief and concentrated, about your views on any of the issues related to artists' books" (ibid.: 6). These comments mirror the intense practical and theoretical interest in the genre starting in the 1960s. Until today, they remain an important reference for international scholars. Their heterogeneity substantiates the formal variety and communicative potential of artists' books, and at the same time points to the inadequacy of applying rigid criteria to them. The *Art-Rite* editors, too, found that the "collective quality of these statements functions as the most basic and genuine definition of artists' books" (ibid.). Picking up on this, most analytical takes on artists' books refrain from sharp distinctions: Johanna Drucker, for instance, explores them as a "zone of activity" (Drucker 1995: 2), which, as Michael Glasmeier puts it, arises from artists' engagements "with books, about, around, for or against" (Glasmeier 1994: 11) them. However, even in the broad sense offered by such a praxeological definition, the asso-

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I am following Griselda Pollock here, who proposes this term (and accordingly: artist-men) instead of "women artists" to counter the naturalization of the "artist" as male. See, for example, Pollock 2024: 53, fn. 7. Yet this vocabulary still risks naturalizing a binary conception of gender. At the same time, a term like "artist-person" would misrepresent the self-conception of most historical actors who framed their actions as being of and for *women*. Against the backdrop of research that has shown how many of these actors contributed to complicating the normative interpretation of this latter category (for *Künstlerinnen international*, see footnote 19), I therefore use the imperfect concept of "artist-women."

5)

This sum corresponds to roughly 50,000 Euros, and today would not even come close to covering the costs for an exhibition of the same format. In 1977 it was enough to pay for the transport and insurance of works both loaned from institutions and private lenders and acquired directly from the artists. However, as the correspondences of the curators show, it was not enough to compensate any of the participating artists whose work was not yet held by galleries or museums, or to pay for their trip to or accommodation in Berlin. But the organizers helped arrange private sleeping options. In response to such an offer, artist Rose Finn-Kelcey replied that she and her colleague Tina Keane "will bring sleeping bags" (letter from February 21, 1977, AST). The *documenta 6*, which was held in the same year, disposed of a budget of 4,800,000 Deutschmarks for a comparable number of works (1,400) but many more artists (624, of which 66 were women), see the entry on the show on the website of the *documenta* archive:

<https://documenta.de/de/retrospective/documenta-6> (accessed June 17, 2026).

ciation of the Berlin publication with a seemingly well-financed, broadly received show seems to contradict its interpretation as an artists' book, since market orientation is a factor that defies even the most flexible approach to artists' books (Drucker 1995: 4–5). Among the *Art-Rite* contributors, too, a critical positioning towards the art market is considered one of the most important potentials of the medium.

— At second glance, though, things were more complicated. Looking at the conditions under which the show and its catalogue were realized reveals, first, that the curators of “Künstlerinnen international” were not simply bourgeois women successfully roaming the art world, and second, that the accompanying publication was more than an excessive record of the show. The impressive conception of the exhibition was neither taken for granted nor easily achieved by the organizers. *Künstlerinnen international* was not simply a product of the system; it was created *with and against the system*.

— In 1973, three artists, Evelyn Kuwertz, Antonia Wernery, and Sarah Schumann, proposed the project to the nGbK, which was founded in 1969 West Berlin based on a grassroots democratic model. They dreamt of staging a major exhibition that would allow tracking works of artist-women through the last century and therefore provide young artist-women with role models. Aware of the financial and organizational requirements of such an ambitious project, they looked for institutional support. The nGbK, which they valued for its political awareness and innovative approaches, seemed a good choice.⁶⁾ However, the predominately male members of the society kept on rejecting the project (Kaiser 2013: 141; Behrens 1991: 81). While they did not oppose its motives, they considered its shape to be immoderate (Bierther et al. 1977: 1). But the applicants refused to give up. Having been involved with the women's movement, they had already faced worse resistance. Before approaching the nGbK, the women had worked together on another project. As part of the group Brot und Rosen (Bread and Roses), they published a handbook on abortion and contraception.⁷⁾ Back then, the entire production relied on feminist structures. In the case of “Künstlerinnen international,” though, the women knew that separatism would not do it. The exhibition the three of them wished for required funding that the movement could not provide. Nevertheless, the ties that the artists had developed with other activists proved vital for acquiring these funds. As the nGbK did not relent, the group decided to beat it with its own weapons, namely, a democratic vote. They called for support among the women's movement, and at the next meeting,

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Evelyn Kuwertz discussed the women's perception of the nGbK with me during a conversation on February 12, 2025. In 1977, the society already looked back at more than eight years of researching, publishing, and exhibiting on various dimensions of the social importance, role, and impact of art. From 1970 to 1973, for example, the working group Kinderspielzeug (Children's Toys) set up an action room for children to try out new forms of group interaction and collaboration; and in 1977, just before “Künstlerinnen international,” the nGbK hosted a show of about 100 pictures that were created in the context of the fight against the criminalization of abortion during the last hundred years.

7)

The *Frauenhandbuch Nr. 1* (Women's Handbook No. 1) was a small but information-packed booklet that immediately sold 10,000 copies, and in 1974 saw a reprint of 100,000 copies (Othmer 2021: 395; Boehm 2024: 107–116). It was self-published by the women without any institutional association or support, as Evelyn Kuwertz told me in a conversation on February 12, 2025. Brot und Rosen was founded by Helke Sander after the dissolution of the Aktionsrat zur Befreiung der Frauen (Action Council for Women's Liberation) that in turn had been formed in opposition to the patriarchal structures within the SDS (Socialist German Students' Union) (Lux 2022: 31–35). Four of its members (Evelyn Kuwertz, Sarah Schumann, Verena Stefan, and Antonia Wernery) were, at least temporarily, involved with “Künstlerinnen international.”

the art society registered a (temporal) member high. Encouraged by word of mouth, many women—even if they were acquainted with the applicants only casually or not at all—joined the nGbK, took part in the vote, and got the project passed (Kaiser 2013: 141; Behrens 1991: 81).

— The project's institutional association came with many advantages: the group's official correspondence, for instance, now featured the nGbK letterhead. It lent professionalism to a group whose members had zero to little experience with organizing exhibitions.⁸⁾ Moreover, the society provided the women with an office that could be used for typewriting, phone calls, meetings, and material storage.⁹⁾ But most importantly, the institutional integration meant: money. Money that the nGbK received from the state-funded Lotto foundation. Thus, for the sake of realizing their vision and contrary to their former separatist approach, the organizers of "Künstlerinnen international" made use of *Staatsknete* (public funds). Yet, while the sum of 100,000 Deutschmarks covered most of the material concerns including the catalogue, it wasn't enough to remunerate the organizers. In the catalogue's foreword, the women refer to the three years of unpaid labor as "self-exploitation" (Bierther et al. 1977: 1). This personal sacrifice of the seven organizers, however, already came with certain privileges: thanks to a supportive social background and (side-)jobs that were compatible with the organization of the show, they *were* able to work for no money, even if under humble circumstances.¹⁰⁾ This points to the precarious conditions under which in 1977 a project "for women about women by women"¹¹⁾ could come into existence. It attests to the fact that expanding women's scope of action by organizing an exhibition and writing a catalogue, tasks that had been almost exclusively male domains beforehand, weren't socially sanctioned anymore—but by no means did they proceed on equal terms. While thus sticking to female personnel at the level of production,¹²⁾ the curators still wished to present the fruits of this work to an audience of all genders.¹³⁾ And successfully did so: 35,000 visitors came to see the exhibition (Kaiser 2013: 138).

— The challenge that such a venture presented to the androcentric art world would, after all, fit Lippard's conception of the artists' book. In line with her call for subversive energy, the project mobilized institutional structures for feminist concerns. But what about the accompanying publication? Of course, one can't simply equate the publication with its context of creation. However, I would claim that it was exactly this context that made *Künstlerinnen international* an artists' book. A context that emerged on the threshold of different,

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Between 1971 and 1973, Evelyn Kuwertz, Antonia Wernery, and Brigitte Mauch worked on an exhibition about the conditions women face in society and in the family (*Zur Situation der Frau in Familie und Gesellschaft*) that, due to the depiction of domestic rape, was cancelled by the Berlin government. In protest, the women showed it at short notice at the Hochschule für bildende Künste (University of Fine Arts). Kuwertz and Wernery were among the initial proponents of "Künstlerinnen international," but only Kuwertz remained in the group until the show's opening. I owe this information to conversations with Evelyn Kuwertz on September 27, 2023, and February 12, 2025. See also Kaiser 2013: 49–60.

9)

Curator Karin Petersen told me about this in a conversation on May 3, 2024.

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Alongside "Künstlerinnen international," artist Sarah Schumann, for instance, presented her works in a solo show at the Berlin Gallery at Savignyplatz (Courage 1977: 48) to earn a living. Karin Petersen, one of her co-curators, financed herself through homework tutoring (hp 1977).

11)

The said motto is quoted from a letter to the editors from March 23, 1977, in which a visitor expresses her enthusiasm about the catalogue. The letter is part of the private archive of curator Inge Schumacher-Tyroller (AST).

12)

While the women did not accept artworks that had been created in collaboration with an artist-man, they did not refuse to work with men in general: Peter Weibel, for instance, took over the correspondence with the group for his partner VALIE EXPORT when she was abroad (see letter from January 11, 1977, AST), while Wolfgang Oppermann stepped in for his partner artist Anna Oppermann and took care of the installation of her work (Schäffler, Kleine and Hossmann 2024: 78).

but partially overlapping social spheres: while feminist artists, activists, and scholars created the publication, it was sold not only to their peers but also to a wider middle-class public, which was interested in art but lacked connections to the women's movement. And it wasn't sold as a pamphlet, artwork, or scientific survey, but, while integrating elements of these forms, was distributed as an exhibition catalogue—a medium that this audience was familiar with. The publication's catalogue-like appearance was not only due to formal decisions, but an effect resulting from its point of sale. Its distribution in conjunction with a major, state-funded exhibition conformed to the codes of the art world and lent the publication the appeal of an exhibition catalogue. At the same time, the critical inclination of its producers and the precarious conditions of its production made it deconstruct these art world norms. Endowed with the subversive energy of an artists' book, the Berlin publication, however, still circulated under the label of an exhibition catalogue and could thus reach a broad audience. I therefore argue that *Künstlerinnen international*, precisely because it was *distributed* as an exhibition catalogue, could *act* as an artists' book.

— At first sight, the publication maintained several key elements of what was then, and still is today, conceived as an exhibition catalogue: it included a foreword, an essay part, biographical material on the artists, and even a color-printed picture section. However, departing from the traditional function of an exhibition catalogue, *Künstlerinnen international* only provided an incomplete index of the show. Instead of documenting the exhibition, it opened up to the visual and intellectual cosmos that inspired its creation: a memoir by Virginia Woolf about her great aunt, the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, was placed next to a home story about Hannah Höch, compiled by curator Karin Petersen; a theory-loaded essay on the Czech surrealist Toyen by philosopher Rita Bischof neighbored field notes of curator Sarah Schumann having coffee with Meret Oppenheim in Paris. And while the chief editor of the international art magazine *heute Kunst*, Gislinde Nabakowski, discussed how to work amidst and against misogynic capitalism, a few pages further VALIE EXPORT presented her "reflections on the relationship between women and creativity" (Bierther et al. 1977: 100). In the second half of the publication, artist's biographies completed this collection of essays, interviews, and reports. These biographical entries, varying in length and form, were compiled by everyone at hand, including the represented artists themselves. In fact, the conception of the entire publication was mainly in the hands of artists, as four of the seven curators were artists themselves. However, it is

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For some hours on March 20, 1977, though, the exhibition was closed for men. This decision was due to an intervention by a group of women who protested against the curatorial politics of the exhibition makers (Courage 1977: 48). They accused the curators of having applied a traditional concept of art by choosing artworks that conformed to the norms of the art market rather than spurring political change. By encouraging other women to bring their artworks to the Charlottenburg Palace, they wished to promote a broader and less hierarchized interpretation of art (Behrens 1991: 95–96). During a discussion between these critics and the curators, men were not allowed to enter the exhibition space for about two hours, according to a retrospective statement in the organizers' records. This statement is part of the AST.

not the professional background of its editors that accounts for the catalogue's proximity to artists' books but the choices they made when creating it.

SELF-REFLEXIVITY — One of these decisions concerns the publication's self-reflexivity, a characteristic that was emphasized by many of Lippard's contemporaries as integral to artists' books (Lippard et al. 1976/1977). Many artists' books that critically reflect on their bookishness either address it as a formal feature or an abstract idea. When referring to their production, they merely do so by exploring its technical side (Drucker 1995: 185–191). Other artists' books, however, lay out the complex social and cultural interactions forming their basis (Thurmann-Jajes 2009: 178). It is this transparency towards the conditions of its creation that marks the closeness of *Künstlerinnen international* to artists' books of the same era. By disclosing the ecologies of knowledge on which it was based, the catalogue's authors demonstrated a specific sensibility to the medium they used, discerning both its economic and epistemic limitations. They not only tried to transmit the structural obstacles to women in art but also articulated the hindrances they encountered when researching them, and more specifically, when creating what was conceived of as a catalogue. In meta-reflections, anecdotes, reading recommendations, address listings, and acknowledgements, this task is conveyed as particularly challenging, and primarily collaborative. The scarcity of sources resulting from poor archival and historiographical records on artist-women and their works is manifested in brief remarks such as “no information to be found” (Bierther et al. 1977: 182; [Fig. 1]) as well as in regrets over the loss or inaccessibility of artworks (ibid.: 162; 144). The catalogue makers also admit the economies of time that limited their research, be it in explicit notes (“Unfortunately, we were not able to get all the material for the catalogue in time, so here are just a few illustrations as examples” (ibid.: 286)) or more implicitly through the time-saving reprint of articles or essays. In the same vein, *Künstlerinnen international* discloses the personal and professional network it relied on to counter these economic and epistemic challenges. The Berlin publication introduces itself as a forum that spans disciplines and nations;¹⁴⁾ it contains articles by international art historians and critics as well as contributions by philosophers and literary scholars. These pieces stand alongside texts which were compiled by women whose language skills or first-hand experience had brought them

14)

The artist biographies in the second half of the catalogue are sorted by nation. Most of the time, the concept is interpreted as place of residence and not of birth. The publication's claim to internationality, though, is narrowed down to “the most important *European* art movements” (Bierther et al. 1977: 2, emphasis mine) in the catalogue's foreword. This corresponds to the Eurocentric bias of the selection, which is explained with procurement problems (ibid.: 3). Betye Saar is the only Black artist who is featured in the catalogue with a photograph of her work *The Queen of Sheba/She* in an entry on the Californian feminist art scene (ibid.: 339), yet she was not represented in a biographical entry. This imbalance is symptomatic of the emerging feminist art history in German-speaking countries of the 1970s and 1980s. While eager to build on American feminist art histories that focused on gender, it ignored the same discipline's critical study of race as hierarchizing principle. This reluctance was finally addressed by the 6th *Kunsthistorikerinnentagung* (Conference of Women Art Historians) in 1995 (Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1997: 8).

Alma Lessing
(um 1900)

Keine Angaben zu finden



182

Erkennung von Offiziellen, Berlin

// Figure 1

Artist biography of Alma Lessing with the indication “No information to be found”

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to the project: journalist Lilia Bevilacqua, for example, who wasn't particularly familiar with art but fluent in Italian, conducted vast research on Italian artists, while artist Ilse Teipelke wrote an article on the Californian women artists' movement, which she got to know during a DAAD funded scholarship. The curators themselves wrote eight of the 18 catalogue essays, driven, first and foremost, by curiosity, but also by pragmatism: their limited resources did not allow them to outsource work—except at no pay. This is why, eventually, an important part of the catalogue was compiled by the featured artists themselves: while the curators granted them the freedom to choose how to represent their work in the publication, the artists took work off their hands. The plurality of voices condensed in *Künstlerinnen international* and the precarious circumstances under which it was produced, however, also show in less intentional ways: brimming with information and ideas, *Künstlerinnen international* is simultaneously full of misspellings and formal irregularities. These imperfections, too, expose the tension between a high level of passion for the cause and the limited resources the curators were constantly dealing with. After all, the will to provide information on artist-women in the past and present outweighed the pursuit of perfection—and met with the wish for a more structural critique by also addressing the fragile status of this information.

— This display of the production level was certainly inspired by publishing strategies developed within the women's movement. In the 1970s, most feminist publications came with either a foreword or an afterword in which the authors disclosed both the economic conditions and social-cultural biases of their writing.¹⁵ Magazines such as *Courage* or *Die Schwarze Botin* were especially eager to integrate a meta-discourse that would reflect the presented contents as being shaped by these factors. In the case of *Künstlerinnen international*, such strategies had already been explored by most members of the curatorial team in diverse contexts,¹⁶ not least by publishing the previously mentioned *Frauenhandbuch*.

— Thus, the catalogue both stimulated and documented the transnational transfer of knowledge between academia, art, and activism. Through reading recommendations (Bierther et al. 1977: 57, fn. 17), the indication of addresses of magazines (ibid.: 99, fn. 11), or calls for participation in art projects (ibid.: 282), it even enabled its readers to continue this transfer. The transparency of *Künstlerinnen international* regarding its social, intellectual, and economic roots lends the catalogue a striking resemblance to artists' books. But it also relates to the central and most critical topic when investigating the scope of this proximity: the diffusion of knowledge

15)

In the afterword to her bestselling novel *Häutungen (Shedding)*, Verena Stefan, for instance, lets her readers know about the challenges that came with independent feminist publishing (Stefan 1976: 125–127). In this afterword, she also refers to her involvement with “Künstlerinnen international” (ibid.: 127). Social and cultural conventions that affect personal expression are addressed by Marianne Wex in her afterword to “Weibliche” und “männliche” *Körpersprache als Folge patriarchalischer Machtverhältnisse* (“Female” and “Male” Body Language as a Manifestation of Patriarchal Power Relations) that she self-published following on the presentation of her research at “Künstlerinnen international” (Wex 1979: 9).

16)

Karin Petersen, for instance, was a member of the editorial team of *Courage* and Evelyn Kuwertz worked on the layout of the magazine's first issue. Two years earlier, she had compiled and published a publication in the form of a newspaper that accompanied the exhibition *Zur Situation der Frau in Familie und Gesellschaft*, see footnote 8. Sarah Schumann contributed to *Die Schwarze Botin*, and both she and Kuwertz designed covers for Helke Sander's magazine *Frauen und Film*.

and the question of whether and when it should be regarded as a defining element of artists' books.

DOCUMENTATION — Historically, the transmission of information about art had been distinguished from artworks themselves, relying on a hierarchical understanding of the latter as original utterance and the former as its mere reproduction or contextualization. Yet, starting in the early 1960s, artists had destabilized that dichotomy by introducing the collection, archiving, and transmission of information into their practices. Instead of privileging the act of creation, they embraced different techniques of recording, ordering, and transmitting lived experience. This development abandoned the traditional difference between art and documentation (Mœglin-Delcroix 2009: 34–35) and contributed to the emergence of artists' books in the 1960s and 1970s. To discern the specific quality of the latter, Anne Mœglin-Delcroix proposes to differentiate between the documentation *of art* and documentation *as art*, acknowledging that the will to document can become an art practice itself—while at the same time maintaining that such practices tend to blur that very opposition (Mœglin-Delcroix 2009: 34, 37). Hence, she concludes that any attempt to determine whether or not a book that predominantly serves as documentation should be considered art, and respectively an artist's book, cannot rely on “outward visible signs” (ibid. 2009: 37) but must look for its historical functions. These are conditioned by the intentions of its makers, its discursive surroundings, and actual reception.

— Thus, investigating the artistic character of *Künstlerinnen international*, and consequently its qualification as an artists' book, I will turn to the catalogue's contemporaries. What did they want artists' books to do? What did the catalogue makers want the catalogue to do? And what did it ultimately do according to its readers?

— As for Lippard, she had found the aspiration of both documentation and information to be at the very heart of feminist artists' books. She opens her statement in *Art-Rite* by pointing to their “value as a means of spreading information” (Lippard et al. 1976/1977: 10) and characterizes them as “inexpensive vehicle[s] for feminist ideas” (ibid.). Although the material assembled in *Künstlerinnen international* meets this definition, Lippard herself would certainly not have referred to every feminist publication that wanted to inform as an artists' book. Nor did the curators themselves consider their passionate but hasty composition of the publication to be a decidedly artistic practice. To the contrary, they repeatedly stressed their will to provide information.¹⁷⁾ This function was also

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In an advertisement from 1976 in the magazine *Ästhetik und Kommunikation* (Vol. 7, Issue 25, p. 91), they refer to the catalogue as a “documentation.” Moreover, in a letter to photographer Gisèle Freud, curator Petra Zöfel holds: “The catalogue will be an important document for the study of female art history” (letter without date [end of 1975], AST).

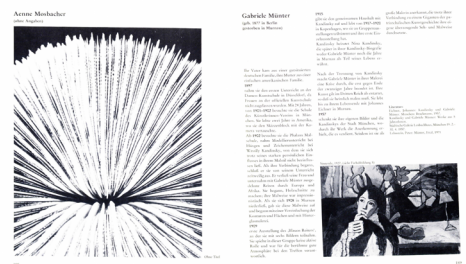
highlighted by most reviewers: complimenting the catalogue's information value, they praised it as a "foundational documentation" (Schimming 1977) bearing the quality of a handbook (Blechen 1977). However, they also pointed to its "unprofessional" appeal (Spatz 1977), noted the clumsy language of entries composed by artists (Blechen 1977), and at the same time emphasized its specific ability to transmit "the often tangled biographies" (ibid.) of artist-women. Similarly, they recognized the catalogue's attempt to convey the conditions under which artist-women worked and continue to work (Stromberg 1977), and enthusiastically rated it as "one of the most beautiful, exciting books I have read in the past few years" (Spatz 1977). These observations resonate with the self-reflexive approach of the catalogue makers discussed above. This self-reflexivity not only applied to their work as editors but also to the lives and work of the artists they researched: instead of accumulating isolated facts, *Künstlerinnen international* addressed both the conditions behind the captured lives and behind this capturing itself. Thus, "to both its makers and its recipients, the catalogue was indeed" a tool of information, but one that surpassed an uncritical amassing of data. *Künstlerinnen international* not only documented what artist-women of the past and present had "worked on until now" (Bierther et al. 1977: 3), but by revealing the complex contexts in which they worked and the categories through which art history retold them or not, pointed to the *fabricated* character of that very knowledge.

COLLECTION AND COLLAGE — This effect was mainly a result of the collaborative character of the catalogue's composition: the collection of material, involving many people in its making, translated into a practice of compilation that corresponded to one of the techniques most important to feminist artists in the 1970s, the collage (Krieger and Streim 2024: 16). Much like the catalogue, feminist art of that era did not ignore the premises of its creation but most often made them its subject. This ambition spurred works that aimed to both reveal and counter androcentric conventions. Collage provided a sophisticated means to realize such simultaneity: it allowed to document and to disrupt at the same time. That same effect was achieved by *Künstlerinnen international* when juxtaposing the diverse material on the artists' lives and works gathered by the curators and their collaborators. On the one hand the catalogue made an effort to comply with the conventions of how to tell an artist's life, while on the other exposing them as contingent and constructed.

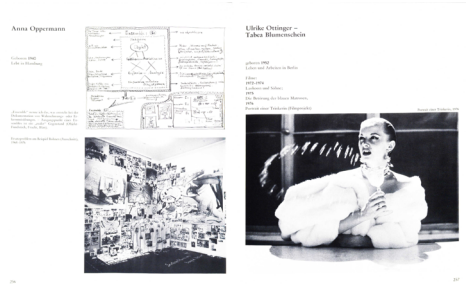
— Due to limited resources, the editors not only relied on the help of friends, colleagues, and the participating artists to obtain

material, but also included most of the material received in the catalogue without further editing. The effects of this editing policy can be observed at both the micro and macro level. It is reflected in diverse types of texts (essay, interview, report, survey) that, despite their heterogeneity, are all assembled under the same heading ("Biographien"). The diverging interpretations of this genre are also reflected in the way the entries use the available space of usually one to two pages: while some of them contain life data presented in tabular form, as personal statements, or in elaborate prose, others forego biographical information altogether (see [Fig. 2]). Unless explicitly stated, it is not always clear whether this is due to a lack of resources or the result of conceptual considerations (see, for example, [Fig. 3]). This irritation proves to be a productive one: it not only draws attention to the paucity of archival records on artist-women but also points to the constructed character of biographies in general, often disguised by standardized tables. In *Künstlerinnen international*, the relation between life and art, which is forged by biographical writing, differs from entry to entry. The readers need to approach it on their own terms and establish connections between materials spanning historical sources, sketches, manifestos, or even letters that explain the absence of a more sophisticated entry by referring to children, sheep, and chicken (see [Fig. 4]). The co-presence of multiple ways of representing an artist and her work attests both to the social and cultural fabrication of art historical writing and to life histories in general. The deconstruction of the artist biography peaks when artist Annette Messenger, mimicking the language of a poetry album, notes: "What she doesn't like: biographies" (Bierther et al. 1977: 291).

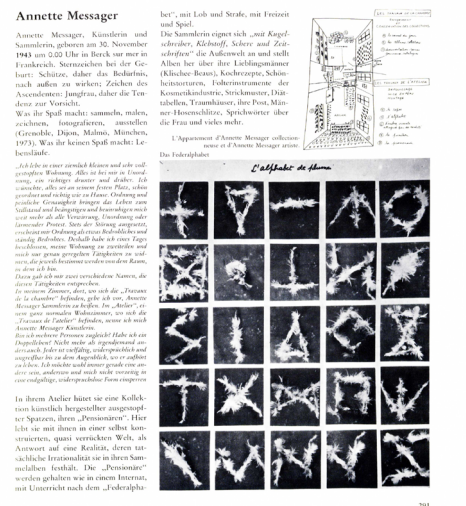
— This aversion of Messenger towards biographies points to the tension that permeated all entries. Taking up one of the most conventional genres of art history, and, from Vasari's *Lives* onwards, one of the dearest to patriarchy (Salomon 1991; Christadler 2000; Berger 2002), this choice of genre, on the one hand, tied in with the traditional function of the exhibition catalogue as a means of promotion. The artist biography offered particularly the younger artists the opportunity to present themselves and their work to the art market. Thus, interpreted as an instrument of capitalizing art, it could be (and indeed was) criticized for merely adding artist-women to a deeply patriarchal and capitalist system



// Figure 2
Artists' biographies of Aenne Mosbacher and Gabriele Münter



// Figure 3
Artists' biographies of Anna Oppermann, Ulrike Ottinger, and Tabea Blumenschein



// Figure 4
Artist biography of Annette Messenger, including a sketch of her apartment floor plan

that, in consequence, would be left untouched.¹⁸⁾ On the other hand, however, the biographies included in *Künstlerinnen international* do not simply recycle a reactionary category but reshape it: not only through the juxtaposition of the diverse yet entirely fabricated shapes an artist's biography can take, but also on the level of content. By referring to life events that in conventional catalogues would have been considered either irrelevant private matters (at least for artist-men) or central information outweighing any discussion of artworks (at least about artist-women), they relate art history as social history: information on love affairs, mental health, and care work are placed alongside questions of style, exhibition records, and prize listings (see [Fig. 5]). In this way, the social conditions that shape an artist's life are made visible and corrupt the idea of the autonomous, God-given genius. At the same time, the specific barriers artist-women encounter also materialize. What would otherwise only show up as fewer exhibitions, poorer training, or long work breaks, is explained, for example, by childcare, "mencare" and poor or no educational opportunities.¹⁹⁾ Through the sheer mass of the biographies assembled in *Künstlerinnen international*, these factors are conveyed as structural obstacles imposed by society, hindering their interpretation as individual fate, or worse, personal failure. Thus, while sticking to the traditional form of the artist biography, at least by title, the catalogue makers were also testing its limits.²⁰⁾

— This tension between assimilation and reformation mirrors what is constitutive of the entire project: the organizers of "Künstlerinnen international" set out to question a system that at the same time provided, even if poorly, for their professional existence. This led to a clashing desire for recognition and change. The catalogue presented a fitting medium to meet this conflict: the unconventional adoption of a conventional form corresponded to both the curators' wish for approval by the art world and the will to reform it. Thus, one could interpret *Künstlerinnen international* as a feminist mobilization of the exhibition catalogue, oscillating between adaption and subversion. The both extensive and fragmentary character of *Künstlerinnen international* calls for its interpretation as an artists' book that emerged as such through its perception as an exhibition catalogue. It was this somehow paradoxical disposition that finally caused it to sell like a batch of hot cookies.

18)

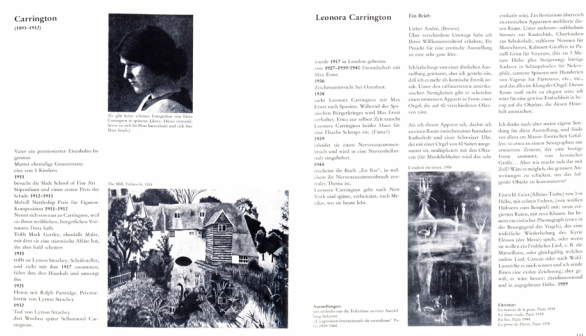
This reproach has been discussed among feminist art historians since the 1970s (Lindner et al. 1989; Salomon 1991; Schade and Wenk 1995; Zimmermann 2009). Among its earliest proponents in Europe were Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker (1981).

19)

This approach did not explicitly abandon the idea of a biological sex. Yet, although it is difficult to generalize the catalogue's stance towards this topic, at multiple instances throughout *Künstlerinnen international* (for example, when VALIE EXPORT analyzes the androcentrism condensed in the concept of creativity (Bierther et al. 1977: 100–104) or Marianne Wex and Gerhild Liebenberg study the social dimension of body language (ibid.: 105–113)), the social and cultural fabrication of gender is emphasized.

20)

The deconstruction of the artist biography performed by *Künstlerinnen international* anticipated how, in the catalogue's wake, feminist art historians started to reexamine the genre, see, for example, Hoffmann-Curtius and Wenk 1997 and Lindner et al. 1989 for the German-speaking context or Pollock 1980, Parker and Pollock 1981, and Salomon 1991 for the Euro-American context.



// Figure 5

Artists' biographies of Dora Carrington and Leonora Carrington, in which "passionate love affairs," care work, and mental health problems are mentioned alongside details on the artists' exhibitions and training

DISTRIBUTION — Even if it is not possible to track whether *Künstlerinnen international* made it to gynecologists' waiting rooms, it is at least not too improbable, as it managed to reach a more diverse public than both artists' books and exhibition catalogues usually did at that time.

— In 1977, just before the opening of the exhibition, Lippard nuanced her earlier statement in an article for *Art in America*. She confessed being guilty of having too easily equated medium and content: While the format of artists' books would, indeed, allow for a broader democratized reception, their content, often obscure and "wildly self-indulgent" (Lippard 1985a: 48), would mostly not—thus keeping the books off the supermarket shelves. At the same time, she questioned that very fantasy of circulation by pointing to the inherent danger of mere adaption to capitalism and instead supported avoiding the commodification of art (ibid.: 47–48).²¹⁾ *Künstlerinnen international* could relate to both findings: While it corresponds to Lippard's observation by presenting one instance where relatively affordable²²⁾ but diverse content was presented in a way accessible enough to reach radical feminists and bourgeois art lovers alike, thus expanding the audience for feminist thought as well as for contemporary art, her warning fittingly names the conflict *Künstlerinnen international* needed to navigate and, astonishingly enough, successfully did. Neither did the catalogue simply adapt to art market conventions, nor did it settle for being an insider tip among activists. Both the catalogue and the show allowed art to be *publicly* questioned from a feminist perspective. While by then, the women's movement was already addressing the androcentric premises of the art world, with *Künstlerinnen international*, this discourse migrated into the public discussion. "Never," the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* reported, "has an art exhibition in Berlin caused so much discord, provoked such heated controversy and protests" (Rhode 1977). This public exchange unfolded in bourgeois newspapers and feminist publications, with both even taking notice of each other.²³⁾ For a rare moment in time, these discourses met—if not for agreement, then at least for debate. A crucial source for this discussion was the exhibition catalogue, which, other than the show, met almost unanimous approval. Karin Petersen, one of the curators, recalls that most of the visitors did not wait until they saw the show but bought it straight away.²⁴⁾ Soon, it went into a second print run. By choosing an exhibition catalogue to publish the scattered universe that the joint effort of artists, scholars, and activists had put together, the creators took advantage of the format's common reputation: people bought it because they saw it as a

21)

Almost ten years later, and looking back on the preceding developments, Lippard (1985b) deepened this critical stance.

22)

The catalogue was sold for 20 Deutschmarks (Ohff 1977).

23)

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (Rhode 1977), for instance, refers to an article that appeared in *Courage* (Haffner 1977), although without naming the exact source.

24)

I owe this information to a conversation with Karin Petersen on May 3, 2024.

medium they were accustomed to, or at least not afraid of—factors that should not be underestimated in a time when feminism was on the verge of entering popular culture (a development *Künstlerinnen international* both fostered and was indicative of) but still provoked anxious to angry skepticism. While the Berlin publication stretched the conventions of an exhibition catalogue, its distribution context and outward structure (foreword, essays, picture section, and biographies) let it appear to comply with them. Thus, the fact that *Künstlerinnen international* was able to attract both middle-class art lovers and feminist audiences can be explained with a careful bending of common structures.

— If one places this story in a broader context, this formal disposition of *Künstlerinnen international* proves to be quite conventional: scholars, such as Michael Glasmeier, Anke te Heesen, and Regine Ehleiter, have shown how, from the 1960s onwards, the exhibition catalogue had taken multiple paths, not only befriending artists' books (Glasmeier 1994: 159; Glasmeier 2004), but also borrowing from academic writing (te Heesen 2015) or occasionally becoming the exhibition itself (Ehleiter 2024). Moreover, new concepts, such as that of "artists' publications" (Schade and Thurmann-Jajes 2009), offer an analytical framework for capturing and contextualizing these intermedia exchanges. However, the feminist contribution to this diversification has only rarely been considered in the historiography of the exhibition catalogue. In addition to *Künstlerinnen international*, many other artists' publications call for closing this gap. They reinterpreted the form of the exhibition catalogue—and at the same time challenged social and cultural hierarchies. It is high time to tell their stories. The historical actors are now between 70 and 80 years old. Talking to them gets *Künstlerinnen international* off the shelves, or sometimes even out from under them. Most often, it is then placed next to some coffee pots and, from time to time, a bowl of cookies.

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// FKW is supported by the Mariann Steegmann Institute and Cultural Critique / Cultural Analysis in the Arts ZHdK

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