

Catherine  
Grant



# A TIME OF ONE'S OWN

Histories of Feminism  
in Contemporary Art

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Histories of Feminism in  
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Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2022

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson

Project Editor: Bird Williams

Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro and Helvetica Neue LT Std

by Copperline Book Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Grant, Catherine (Catherine Mary), author.

Title: A time of one's own : histories of feminism in contemporary art /  
Catherine Grant.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2022. | Includes  
bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021057125 (print) | LCCN 2021057126 (ebook)

ISBN 9781478016205 (hardcover)

ISBN 9781478018841 (paperback)

ISBN 9781478023470 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Feminism and art. | Feminism in art. | Homosexuality  
and art. | Art—Political aspects. | Feminist theory. | Queer theory. |

BISAC: ART / History / General | ART / Women Artists

Classification: LCC N72.F45 G74 2022 (print) | LCC N72.F45 (ebook) |

DDC 704/.0420905—dc23/eng/20220526

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021057125>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021057126>

*Cover art:* Mary Kelly, *WLM Demo Remix*, 2005, still, 1.30 minute film loop.

Collection Centre for Contemporary Art, Warsaw. Courtesy of the artist and

Pippy Houldsworth Gallery.

For my friends

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## Acknowledgments

This book has taken a long time to write, and there are many people to thank. While I was working on it, a number of important friendships developed, particularly through shared enthusiasms around feminism and its histories in art. Friends who have helped with all kinds of support, from reading recommendations to sharp critiques, include Fiona Anderson, Judy Batalion, Sam Bibby, James Boaden, Sarah James, Dominic Johnson, Sam McBean, Ella Mills, Ros Murray, Tahani Nadim, Kate Random Love, Elsa Richardson, Dot Price, Jeanine Tang, and Francesco Ventrella. Two writing groups have sustained me through the writing of this book. At Goldsmiths, I've drawn on the imagination and insight of Ros Gray, Laura Guy, Ian Hunt, Susan Kelly, Kristen Kreider, Nadja Milner-Larsen, and Wood Roberdeau. While Kristen, Laura, and Nadja have now left Goldsmiths, their work continues to inform my thinking, and many conversations with them have prompted ideas found in these pages. In Hilary Robinson's writing group, I have had the honor of drawing on the feminist expertise of Flick Allen, Lina Džuverović, Althea Greenan, Alexandra Kokoli, Ceren Özpınar, Lara Perry, Helena Reckitt, Lucy Reynolds, Jo Stockham, and Amy Tobin. Althea Greenan, as curator of the Women's Art Library, has been a friend for more than twenty years, and her insights into feminist friendships, collaborations, and conflicts across generations have always been of huge value.

The first piece of writing was done as part of the "Writing Art History" project at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. My sincerest thanks go to Patricia Rubin and the members of the writing group, who supported and interrogated the earliest ideas found here. My students at the Slade, the Courtauld Institute of Art, and Goldsmiths were incredibly helpful as I worked out ideas around the legacies of feminism in contemporary art and proposed my expanded con-

cept of reenactment through Brecht and Woolf. Some have now gone on to do groundbreaking scholarship, and I'm honored to call a number of them friends—in particular, Jen Boyd, Giulia Damiani, Flora Dunster, Clarissa Jacobs, Louisa Lee, Kostas Stasinopoulos, and Amy Tobin. Flora requires special thanks for introducing me to a couple of key works in the book and for fantastic research assistance. She also introduced me to Erin Liu, whom I thank for collating the bibliography from all manner of files and papers. Lisa Castagner is an important artist in her own right but was generous enough to take photographs of my office and bookshelves to visualize what I'd been trying to get down on paper. Mignon Nixon, my PhD supervisor, inspired me greatly with her subtle, humorous, and detailed feminist scholarship and pedagogy. Her mention of Virginia Woolf's advice to women in *Three Guineas* made me return to Woolf's work on feminism, politics, and creativity for what would be an incredibly fruitful line of investigation.

This book maps a network of artists, curators, writers, archivists, and activists who have engaged with feminism and its histories. I thank them all, particularly those who were interviewed for this book or who entered into email conversation about their work: Ego Ahaïwe Sowinski, Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz, Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Oriana Fox, Clare Gasson, Rose Gibbs, Faye Green, Laura Guy, Emma Hedditch, Nazmia Jamal, Mary Kelly, Catherine Long, Samia Malik, Allyson Mitchell, Laura Mulvey, Every Ocean Hughes, Ochi Reyes, Lucy Reynolds, Michelle Williams Gamaker, and Rehana Zaman. I also thank all of the artists who have given me images of their work to reproduce in this book. I've drawn on the research assistance and expert advice of archivists, librarians, curators, and gallerists, many of whom have been very generous in sharing resources and ideas. I've already mentioned Althea Greenan at the Women's Art Library, who was invaluable, as were her colleagues Lesley Ruthven and Jessa Mockridge. Alongside this fabulous collection I have relied on volunteers at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, Brooklyn, New York; Kelly Wooten, Research Services and Collection Development Librarian, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Durham, North Carolina; Anna Piggott, Feminist Library, London; Helen MacDonald, Glasgow Women's Library; Simon Gowing, Melanie García, and Roberta Cotterli at Tanya Leighton, Berlin; Emily Pethick, Rijksakademie, Amsterdam; Kadeem Oak and Lizzy Whirrity, Cubitt Gallery, London; Freddie Radford, Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London; Alex Bennett, Hollybush Gardens, London; Kalale Dalton; Sam Roeck, Eisenman Studio; Cecilia Widenheim, Malmö Konstmuseum; and Lena Malm, Iaspis, Stockholm.

I presented early versions of many chapters in this book at conferences and seminars, and I thank all of the organizers and participants for thought-provoking conversations. Particularly important moments include “The Granddaughters’ Generation,” a celebration at University College London on the occasion of Linda Nochlin’s eightieth birthday, organized by Jo Applin and Francesca Berry; the Her Noise symposium at the Tate Modern, organized by Irene Revell; the Feminist Object(ive)s symposium, University of York, organized by Victoria Horne and Amy Tobin; “Recollecting Forward: Feminist Futures in Art Practice, Theory and History,” at the Association of Art Historians Annual Conference, Royal College of Art, London, organized by Joanne Heath and Alexandra Kokoli; “Flying: An Interdisciplinary Conference on Kate Millet” at Birkbeck, University of London, organized by Sam McBean; the “Anachronism” symposium at Queen Mary, University of London, organized by Ros Murray; the “We (Not I)” workshop at Raven Row, London, organized by Melissa Gordon; and “Gleaning from Mary Kelly,” Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, organized by Mignon Nixon. Irene Revell’s curation has been inspirational, particularly her work with Electra and Clare Louise Staunton at Flat Time House. The editors of journals and books that published early versions of some chapters helped immensely to sharpen my thinking as it progressed. Special thanks to Jo Applin and Francesca Berry at the *Oxford Art Journal*, where early versions of chapters 1 and 3 were published; Lara Perry and Victoria Horne, editors of *Feminist Art History Now*, where some of the ideas found in chapters 2 and 3 were tried out in a different form; and Cait McKinney and Allyson Mitchell, editors of *Inside Killjoy’s Kastle: Dykey Ghosts, Feminist Monsters, and Other Lesbian Hauntings*, where a shorter version of chapter 2 appeared. Early on, this research was supported by a travel grant from the Terra Foundation and a number of Research Support Awards from the Art Department at Goldsmiths, for which I’m very thankful. I also thank Gavin Butt and Stephen Johnstone, who have both been important mentors during my time at Goldsmiths.

My family have been mostly bemused by my writing on fannish attachments and feminism but have been supportive and proud nonetheless. My mum, dad, sisters, and brother have all encouraged the bookish enthusiasms that fuel much of what follows. My partner, Francis Summers, has been there throughout, sharing many ideas and moments of excitement as well as the looped and disrupted temporalities of parenting. Our children, Maud and Ezra, and my stepdaughter, Betty, have stretched out the time of writing this book, but now that it’s done, I’m grateful, as it made me think deeply about what I wanted from writing and

how having a time of one's own is a profoundly political endeavor. Thank you to Annie Lubinsky for taking the manuscript through the final stages with such care, Courtney Leigh Richardson for the beautiful cover, and Jane Horton for the index. Finally, a sincere thank you to Ken Wissoker and Joshua Gutterman Tranen at Duke University Press, and to the anonymous readers of the manuscript, for pushing my ideas forward into the form you read here.

## Introduction

### Anachronizing Feminism

This book began with a zine hanging in a gallery as part of a modest exhibition about self-publishing in 2004. The zine's cover was a simple combination of the title in gold lettering, "LTTR," and a photograph depicting a woman wearing a strap-on and a mask of David Wojnarowicz, an artist whose career had been dedicated to representing queer life and death (figures 1.1–1.2).<sup>1</sup> Flicking through the pages of the zine (this was a small show in which the publications were available to touch as well as creating an installation in the space) I saw something I had been looking for, something that I recognized: a feminism that was queer, satirical, performative, angry, heartfelt, and funny.<sup>2</sup> This was not feminism taught as an institutional set of texts, rules, or politics. This was a feminism that was remade from icons and ideas of previous moments; remade for a community that was queer and rebellious; that mixed what was needed from feminism as well as from queer, trans, anti-capitalist, and postcolonial sources. On reading that LTTR stood for (among other things) "Lesbians to the Rescue," I laughed. However, the zine was serious about the need to take up the possibilities of feminism and remake them for the contemporary moment, something I also had felt was central to what I wanted to do as an art historian and a writer. At the back of the zine was a call for submissions for the second issue. This otherwise unremarkable call for participation spoke to me, as I wanted to take part in the community LTTR was shaping across its pages. As I flicked through



FIGURE 1.1. Installation shot of “Public Library,” part of the first Publish and Be Damned zine fair, curated by Emily Pethick and Kit Hammonds, designed by Pablo León de la Barra, Cubitt Gallery, London, 2004. The first issue of *LTTR* is just visible in the second row of zines. Courtesy of Cubitt Artists.

the list of contributors, I recognized connections with friends and groups in London, although the zine was based in New York. The threads of a queer feminist constellation materialized on the page, with connections felt across time and space.

The zine format is one that offers space for the reader to become a participant and encourages a blend of writing and image making that does not necessarily pay attention to historical conventions or disciplinary boundaries of the topic at hand. In this first issue of *LTTR*, the historical material reanimated ranges from an Artemesia Gentileschi painting to Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*, alongside theoretical texts on trans politics; performative objects, including a bookmark based on a phrase used by Civil War reenactors; personal reflections; performance documentation; and a photograph that would be used

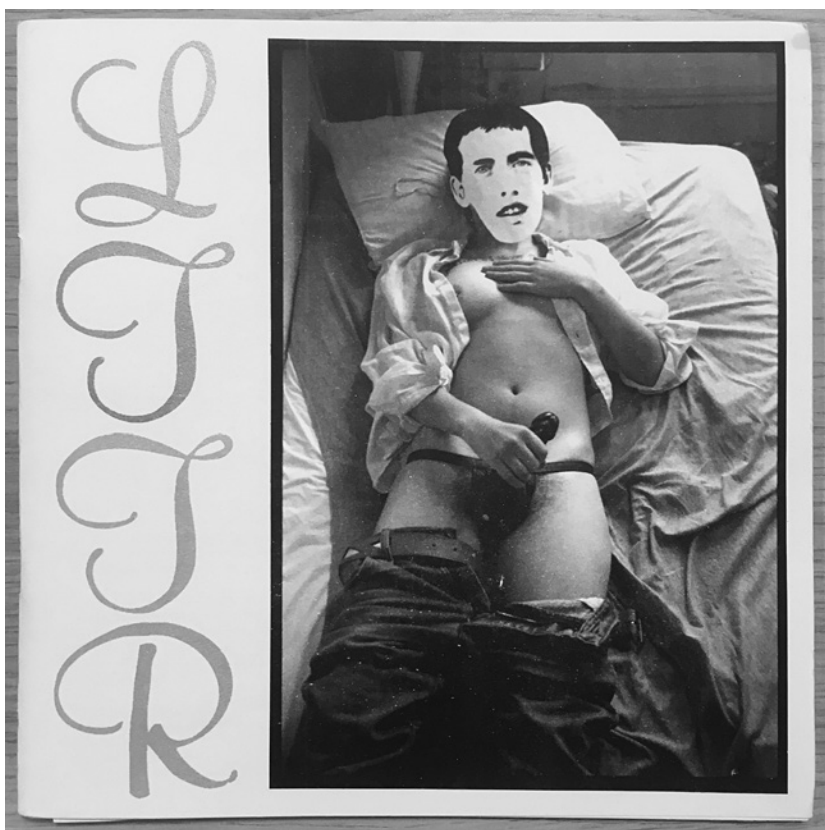


FIGURE 1.2. *LTTR*, no. 1, September 2002. Cover image: Every Ocean Hughes, *Untitled* (David Wojnarowicz Project), 2002. Photograph by Catherine Grant. Courtesy of the artist.

in J. D. Samson's 2003 *Lesbian Calendar*. There are no demarcations among historical modes of feminism or any clear definition of what might constitute artistic practices influenced by feminism. Instead, there is a messy, productive, and assertive relationship to a range of politics that center feminism but do not end there. The zine embraces historical material in a manner that refuses the narratives of "postfeminism" or "bad girls" in art that dominated the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Instead the publication could be placed as an artistic reimagining of riot grrrl and queer punk scenes that emerged in the early 1990s and were still going strong in the early 2000s—based on music, do-it-yourself (DIY) production, and local community formation—sidestepping the concerns of an art world that had mostly relegated feminism to a historical movement.<sup>4</sup>

Since the publication of the first issue of *LTTR* (in 2002) there has been a groundswell of explicit references to feminism in contemporary art. This book asks how and why artists and other cultural practitioners have engaged with histories of feminism since the early 2000s. I argue that what joins many contemporary artistic approaches to feminism's histories can be understood as strategies of fannish reading and rewriting, with all the excesses of affect that the figure of the fan implies, which I contextualize and develop within an expanded concept of reenactment. My starting point for theorizing reenactment as it is found in these affective encounters is as a form of embodied quotation that takes archival material as a script to be taken up, re-performed, rehearsed, and revised. To understand the process of revision that can take place through the respeaking of a text or the rehearsal of a gesture, I propose that artists, curators, and writers have staged conversations both with groups in the present and imaginatively with figures and ideas from the past. Covering artworks from 2002 to 2017, this book maps a revival of feminism in contemporary art that is not an unquestioning celebration or nostalgia.<sup>5</sup> Instead, it takes up the creative, and political, implications of disrupted temporalities to activate "a time of one's own." Each chapter explores how the critical return and revision of feminist ideas in art have led to proposals and discussions as to what feminism means in the contemporary moment and what else it might need to draw on. Like *LTTR*, the chapters return to a range of material that is various and sometimes surprising, including feminist artworks, political actions, literary texts, iconic figures, TV shows, influential artists, obscure events, and archival objects. Across the chapters, a mostly Anglo-American set of references is returned to for what they offer in the present, a series of relationships that, I argue, can be articulated as forms of fannish, autodidactic, collective learning from history.

The argument that threads through the book is that, for many artists and writers influenced by feminism, the present moment can be understood only through an intense, embodied engagement with history. Their forms of learning from history reinhabit and reimagine feminism's pasts, often through a combination of archival research and personal experience. These moments of connection are ones I recognize in my own encounters with feminism as both a contemporary politics and a rich historical resource. This project began as I attempted to write alongside these contemporary art practices, to give words to my own sense of feminism's disruptive, looping temporalities and my place within them. While I say this book begins in the early 2000s, in fact its beginnings are multiple, stretching back across my own passionate attachments to histories of feminism found outside of and within art. In each chapter, I work through elements of how artists and other cultural producers are creating mo-

ments through which to engage with feminism's histories. In this introduction, I situate the strategies of reenactment that are employed in these practices through the idea of *anachronizing*. The importance of anachronism in thinking about history and the contemporary moment has been developed by a number of theorists. It is threaded through queer theories of temporality and is key to politicized thinking about history.<sup>6</sup> Here, the particular stakes of anachronizing feminism are grounded by encounters that take place within the artworks themselves and the experience of the viewer as well as by the potential for learning that occurs.<sup>7</sup> To *anachronize* is a verb that foregrounds the strangeness of moments of time coming together. This anachronizing brings out the specificity (and possible malleability) of our contemporary moment as well as a reflection of what might be useful from feminism's past. The word *anachronize* itself sounds made up but resides in the dictionary, although it is described as a verb that is rare. The definition given is "to confound time" or "to put into a wrong chronological position; to transfer to a different time."<sup>8</sup> Feminism itself has been seen as an anachronism, but rather than seeing this as a problem, I use it as a starting point into the layers of time and experiences that are brought together in attempts to imagine a feminist future. To "confound time" is to imagine time differently, and in the artistic practices I highlight, this often occurs through visceral and affective encounters. This book explores how artists have done this to bring feminism's histories back to life in the present, transforming them as they do so. As Juliet Mitchell has proposed, feminism is not a failed revolution but the "longest revolution."<sup>9</sup> As someone who has found feminism through its histories, I have included my own anachronistic experiences within the real and imagined feminist communities that are in this book, narrating an intentionally incomplete history of feminism's pasts reimagined in recent artistic practices.

This book charts a period in which ideas from queer theory about disrupted temporalities and archival affects have been taken up within artistic practices that foreground feminist histories.<sup>10</sup> Rather than a progression from feminist to queer, I explore the productive conversations that have taken place between them as well as the meditations within feminism on the possibilities of thinking politically across time. Joining these conversations with a focus on embodied relationships with material histories, this book draws on thinking across disciplines from performance studies to feminist theory.<sup>11</sup> The background to these theoretical developments has comprised numerous grassroots initiatives that have reworked feminist politics in the present as well as a resurgence of intersectional feminist imagining across academic and popular writing that draws on queer and trans theory, Black feminism, and anti-capitalist politics.<sup>12</sup> In this introduction I explore how these developments in feminist art, activism,

and thinking have commonalities with discussions about how to define *the contemporary* in art history and philosophy, and I propose models through which to think about these returns as politically and affectively motivated scenes of learning: contemporary versions of consciousness-raising across and through history.

#### FANS AND FEMINIST COMMUNITIES

My first theorization of these relationships between the past and the present was to propose that artists such as those found in *LTTR*, as well as myself and other writers and curators, are “fans of feminism.” I started working on this idea after noticing an increase in references to feminism’s histories by contemporary artists alongside renewed discussions of feminism in contemporary art. This moment is marked by the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (2007), which amplified the growing interest in feminist art, politics, and ideas across generations of artists, writers, and curators.<sup>13</sup> The energy, community building, pleasure, and queerness of much of this contemporary engagement with feminist histories was something I saw as a form of fandom to which I related, rather than seeing myself as a “daughter” or “granddaughter” of previous feminist moments.

The figure of the fan is one way to get around the problem of how to conceptualize relationships across time, which has been subjected to fierce debate within feminist discourse. The fan is not gendered or imagined in a familial structure. As I explore in chapter 1, as early as 1986 B. Ruby Rich was defining a generational shift within feminism, saying: “Feminism has become a mother figure, and what we are seeing is a daughter’s revolt.”<sup>14</sup> More than thirty years later, there is still a pull toward the familial and the maternal when thinking about lineage in feminist art.<sup>15</sup> The figure of the fan challenges this and begins temporally disruptive conversations across time that understand there is a differential across historical moments but refuse to see that as a linear progression. To be a fan is to have a close attachment to the fan object, one that has been influentially theorized as an attachment that is antagonistic as well as admiring.<sup>16</sup> To be a fan is also often to be in dialogue, taking part in a community that is driven by a shared fascination and a desire to learn.<sup>17</sup>

The community around *LTTR* has grown into a transnational queer network. It started small, a group of friends based in New York.<sup>18</sup> Since the first issue of *LTTR* was published in 2002, the group has become well known within contemporary art and is now seen as setting a key example in developing queer feminist approaches to art practice and writing.<sup>19</sup> The term *queer feminist* was not yet in

popular circulation in the early 2000s, and LTTR referred to itself as a “feminist genderqueer collective.”<sup>20</sup> Until the mid-2010s, most combinations of *feminist* and *queer* acknowledged the tensions among various non-heteronormative versions of feminism, including lesbian feminist, trans, and queer perspectives. Many of the artists in this book are having queer conversations with feminism or feminist conversations with queer history, often interrogating the possibilities for a queered feminism that does not police boundaries of identities, politics, and communities. In this book I am interested in how queerness has been part of feminism all along, how lesbian and non-heteronormative histories are central to feminism, rather than in seeing “queer feminism” as a new phenomenon. When I first came across LTTR, its use of the word *lesbian* transgressed what was seen as “relevant” within contemporary art; it read as an anachronism at a time when *queer* dominated as a term and put *lesbian* into play with a range of trans, feminist, and otherwise queer perspectives on sexuality and identity. As Every Ocean Hughes puts it: “We’re here to reconstitute a new team under an old threat. . . . [T]his lesbian we speak of, I find him as ambiguous in nature as in verse. I find her over and over again.”<sup>21</sup> Also key was the group’s forceful self-organizing in the face of an art world that was still dominated by artists sold on their own uniqueness and individuality through a powerful gallery system. In contrast, LTTR drew on DIY networks, putting out a project aimed at fellow queers and feminists (while also staging the problems of working in close-knit communities). Across the chapters of the book I chart a series of projects that are often working on the periphery of the commercial art world, although some of the artists have become well known, and I explore tensions between levels of art-world success and privilege alongside more familiar tensions around generational identity.

Across the course of the book, there is not a straightforward progression through time; instead, there is a swerving motion that charts a course between queer feminist practices from the early 2000s and the conversations with the Women’s Liberation Movement across North America and Western Europe, through archival research that delves into decades (and sometimes centuries) of feminism’s histories, to conversations that stretch from the 1980s to the 2010s about the possibilities of intersectional feminist and queer politics. This swerving motion (which I think of as a series of returns) is also found in the location of the artists and cultural practitioners. It articulates a transnational network of feminist artists, writers, and curators that stretches across North America, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe. This includes cultural practitioners working in London, where I write, as well as in New York, Los Angeles, and Berlin, all well-known centers for contemporary art. They are joined by those

working in cities that include Newcastle, Glasgow, and Preston in the United Kingdom; Stockholm; Oslo; Vienna; and Toronto. The projects explored here are not the result of my intrepid exploration but, rather, connections across these locations, a spiderweb of transnational feminist and artistic networks. My encounter with *LTTR* in a small exhibition in London is an example of this. The selection of artists' publications shown in an artist-run gallery was the product of friendships across the Atlantic as well as curatorial research.

Similarly, across the course of the chapters I have not smoothed out the different moments in which they are written but allow them to stand as markers that set out a recent history of feminism and contemporary art. Chapter 1 expresses the pleasure and tensions found in the returns to feminism's histories in the mid- to late 2000s, a moment in which political art practice and the possibility of protest was being debated within the art world. Chapters 2 and 3 chart the late 2000s and early 2010s and the growing visibility of activist feminist communities, both outside and within the art world, alongside the staging of a huge range of feminism's histories in contemporary art as forms of learning from history. Chapter 4 frames a range of group practices that span from the gallery to the classroom to the street, charting shifts among feminist groups speaking together, and speaking to one another, from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s, imagined as versions of a "feminist chorus." Chapter 5 takes up the ways in which two influential artists—Lubaina Himid and Mary Kelly—have articulated their own histories through an emphasis on conversations and communities that are formed across time. I narrate their parallel feminist constellations, which refuse a neat historical mapping of the artists and cultural practitioners found in this book, looping through the 1970s and '80s in Britain and New York, linking with their present communities in the art world and universities across North America and the United Kingdom: a transnational feminist community. The chapter, like the book as a whole, emphasizes that there is not one historical narrative to be told about feminism's histories in contemporary art but, instead, a constellation that should be constantly rearticulated so it can be learned from in each particular moment. The book ends with a conclusion that moves away from the discussion of artworks and instead provides a way to think about the forms of writing that have been necessary to write about the critical and creative engagements with history found within them. One crucial aspect of a time of one's own—having time to be creative—is explored from the perspective of the time it has taken to write this book and how Virginia Woolf's text *A Room of One's Own* has been used by generations of feminists as a model to resist, remake, and reimagine the possibilities that creativity, writing, and learning mean within feminism. This leads into a discussion of Woolf's

provocative notion of a “new, poor college” in *Three Guineas* in relation to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten’s concept of the undercommons.

The period starting in the early 2000s and leading up to the end of the 2010s is one in which artists have found a huge array of feminist predecessors, experienced as a community and continuum of possibility by some and as authority figures in need of reconfiguring by others. Across the book, this is explored through different models, starting with fandom, then looking to other modes of communal learning. I argue that many contemporary artworks try to imagine feminist communities that are “at once discovered, invented and constructed” (to borrow Teresa de Lauretis’s phrase).<sup>22</sup> Not restricted to those who identify as women, while often (but not always) insisting on the importance of attending to the experience of those who identify as women and/or lesbian and/or queer and/or trans to understand the structures of heteronormativity, contemporary artists are finding new ways to connect with these histories. I hold the awkwardness of this listing as a way to underline the complexities of contemporary artists’ relationships to feminism. Various identity formations across moments in time are a topic in many works and are explored in more detail later in this introduction through a multiscreen video by the American artist Sharon Hayes.

This imagined community of feminists holds divisions and conflict as well as intimacy and kinship. The discussion of racial politics and the position of women of color within feminism has been an urgent one as I have researched this book.<sup>23</sup> As a white art historian, I explore how artists and curators of color are addressing the need to return to histories of Black feminism, foregrounding conversations between women of color while also allowing space for a white viewer. Through the idea of a “feminist chorus” and the concept of the constellation, explored later in the introduction, I look at different communities of feminists and the sometimes antagonistic relationships among women artists along lines of race, particularly in regard to visibility and art-world success. While writing, I returned to conversations between the poets and writers Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde as they navigated their friendship, shared passions and the need to find common ground between Black and white women, and expressed moments of tension as well as kinship.<sup>24</sup> These conversations are also found within their writing. For example, Rich begins the essay “To Invent What We Desire” by asking, “What does a poet need to know?”<sup>25</sup> One of her answers to this question comes in the form of a quotation from Lorde, the title of her famous essay, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury.” In it, Lorde argues that poetry is the space of imagining where new possibilities come forward; that it is “a revelatory distillation of experience.”<sup>26</sup> She presents poetry as one way into the unspoken, unrepresented realities of women’s oppression and contends that seeing such ac-

tivity as a luxury means that “we give up the future of our worlds.”<sup>27</sup> Poetry as a space of imagining new possibilities can also be seen as a way of thinking about the artistic practices tracked in this book and how they imaginatively bring together different moments in time to learn from history and remake it for the present.

With her emphasis on what poetry can do, Lorde pays close attention to feelings and their political implications in regard to gender, sexuality, and race, anticipating recent interest in affect in queer theory. Many writers have used Lorde’s writing as a map to imagine a new politics and an archive of feelings in the present, with her words being central to Sara Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* and the theorization of intersectional feminist politics.<sup>28</sup> Echoing Lorde, Ahmed writes that, for her, “feminism is poetry,” a way of taking up words, histories, and objects.<sup>29</sup> Lorde initially wrote “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” while serving as poetry editor at the feminist journal *Chrysalis*, employing the pages of the journal to reach a community and to create one. However, this potential community was short-lived, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs has explored. Lorde and her fellow poet June Jordan resigned from *Chrysalis* in protest over the marginalization of women of color.<sup>30</sup> These tensions have not disappeared in the decades since and have become part of the conversation about how to create intersectional feminist communities; these tensions are reflected in a number of the artworks I explore, including the London-based, artist-run Women of Colour Index Reading Group, discussed as an example of a feminist chorus in chapter 4.

#### LEARNING FROM HISTORY

From the figure of the fan, this book moves through the possibilities of learning from history, starting with an expanded definition of *reenactment*. To extend the group work and collective learning that takes place in fannish communities, I focus on the pedagogical relationships that occur in many art practices and relate them to Bertolt Brecht’s considerations of how to turn the theater into a space of group learning. Drawing on his speculative outlines for the learning-play (his translation of *Lehrstück*), I propose that feminist histories become scripts that are starting points for discussion and embodied revisions, a rehearsal of possibilities that also creates a feminist community in the present. This return to Brecht is also a feminist repetition, as his writings were influential in the 1970s in thinking about the politics of representation, with key ideas taken up by many feminist artists and writers.<sup>31</sup> However, his concept of the learning-play was not taken up with the enthusiasm given to others, such as *Verfremdungseffekt*

(defamiliarization or alienation effect). Here I treat his model as historical material that is only now coming into a Benjaminian constellation with the present.<sup>32</sup> As set out later in this introduction, Walter Benjamin's enigmatic theories of history have been crucial for the development of queer temporalities as well as for discussions of re-performance and reenactment. I take Benjamin's concept of the constellation as a way to think about our relationship with the contemporary moment and its potential for illuminating moments in the past (with Brecht's learning-play as a method for enacting this). I put these discussions of disrupted temporalities alongside feminist approaches to history writing and consciousness-raising to show how they hold potential for analyzing the performance of anachronistic relationships to time. I propose that the artworks explored in this book rework Benjaminian ideas by creating a sense of community across time and space, rather than by foregrounding an individual's relationship to moments in time, in which the anachronizing of history is felt as a visceral connection to others in the present moment and through crucial moments of the past.

I have used a reworking of Woolf's famous phrase "a room of one's own" to bring together these ideas. I take her explorations of the necessity for a space to be creative and a sense of a location within a history (or, at the very least, a fantasy of one) and reimagine them as "a time of one's own." A time of one's own is a way to think about bringing together different moments in time and how this can facilitate creativity, a sense of identity, and the possibility of a community. By focusing on the time rather than the room in Woolf's arguments, I join her historical text with contemporary concerns about time-poverty, as some of us now have a room but no time to use it. Many feminists have taken up *A Room of One's Own* and reimaged it. There is a continued possibility contained within the book's title, its argument, and the method of its presentation through personal experience, fantasy, and research. A quotation from the Italian feminist group Milan Women's Bookstore Collective is just one reworking: "The room of one's own must be understood differently, then, as a symbolic placement, a space-time furnished with female gendered references, where one goes for meaningful preparation before work, and confirmation after."<sup>33</sup> This version of a room of one's own as a "space-time" that enables feminist work is threaded through the artworks and ideas explored in this book. This space-time is also a way to think about the layers of time that come together in acts of anachronizing, allowing for them to be seen anew as they are put together in different combinations in our contemporary moment. The "female-gendered references" have expanded over recent decades to encompass complex feminist communities and histories that are reworked by artists, writers, and curators.