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Dear reader(s)

Jessica Goodman, Vanessa Gravenor, Mathilde ter Heijne

This publication brings together contributors from different backgrounds, disciplines and generations to reflect on the ways historical and geographical contexts have shaped the artistic heritage of women and non-binary people. It considers how that heritage has come down to us and how we, as contemporary authors, might participate in rediscovering the work and influence of our artistic and literary predecessors.

How does one narrate a life? This question has preoccupied authors, biographers, and historians for millennia. From Augustine's Confessions to Rousseau's secular autobiography, and on to the contemporary memoir, the relationship between truth and self-narration has always been complex. Even more difficult, however, is the task of narrating the life of another: a subjectivity accessible only through conversation, fragments, letters, or archival traces. Whose truth matters here? And how do we speak responsibly for those who came before us?

Our research for *Dropping In and Out* focuses in particular on non-linear and fragmented life paths. Many of the figures addressed in this publication encountered interruptions through care work, illness, political upheaval, war, migration, or social conflict. Rediscovering such lives rarely follows a straight line. What has been written out of historical canons and excluded from dominant narratives often has to be sought deliberately: between the lines of archives, in silences, or within private domains.

Letters are one such domain. As the vectors of informal networks, letters hold doubts, affections, daily observations, and reflections. They record movement and pause, distance and proximity, offering insight into the lived circumstances of those who came before us. Before the acceleration of digital communication, letter-writing was one of the most accessible forms of written expression, sustaining relationships across time and space. Whether women consciously used letters as intellectual practice, or whether the act of corresponding itself opened a space for reflection and thought, remains difficult to determine. Either way, letters constituted a vital space for female intellectual life across long stretches of history. For this reason, we chose to centre this publication around imagined or impossible letters. In a present shaped by speed and instant communication, writing a letter offers a different tempo. It invites slowness, attentiveness, and care. A letter does not merely transmit information; it shares thought, emotion, and lived experience. To honour both the fragility and endurance of letters, we chose the format of a tabloid zine: a material form that allows ideas and exchanges to circulate beyond the constraints of traditional academic or commercial publishing.

As editors, we conceived of the contributors as forming a network that developed dialogically. The project evolved through individual conversations and collective exchanges, including a hybrid kick-off meeting at the University of the Arts Berlin. This dialogical approach is most evident in the edited interviews with Elleke Boehmer and Hanne Loreck, in which both reflect on their academic trajectories and on moments of interruption, withdrawal, or resistance within their professional lives. These conversations prompted a broader methodological question: how might we narrate careers without reproducing myths of linear success?

When describing not only lives but creative careers, sociological models, 'most notably Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital', have often framed success in terms of visibility, recognition, and accumulation. As we followed the trajectories of our subjects, however, it became clear that the notion of "dropping out" is itself predicated on such a model. Feminist scholars have long critiqued this framework, pointing to other forms of value—emotional, relational, and experiential—that remain largely unacknowledged. Reframing moments of "dropping out" as moments of shifting capital allows for a different reading: one that does not measure the uneven paths of women and non-binary artists against a normative, linear career model, but instead names the internal and external forces that shape these trajectories. In doing so, we hold gaps, silences, and pauses alongside public achievements, recognising them as constitutive rather than marginal.

At a time marked by austerity and growing precarity, this rethinking feels particularly urgent. What strategies of survival can we learn from those who came before us? What becomes possible through intergenerational dialogue? We hope that this zine can begin to offer a blueprint for how future generations of authors and artists might navigate their shifting trajectories, so that the network we have established here, reaching backwards and sideways in time, will also extend forwards, to encompass you, dear readers, and all of our successors.

Yours Truly
The Editors

Interrogate the Silent Places—Female Solidarity and Academic Challenges

A conversation with Elleke Boehmer Jessica Goodman, Mathilde ter Heijne.

J.G. Since 2007, you've held the Professorship of World Literature in English at the University of Oxford. Your work has been seen as foundational to the fields of colonial and postcolonial studies, British colonial history, and understandings of nation, narration and gender.

We wanted to begin by asking you whether you had experienced moments or periods of dropping out in your own career?

E.B. Yes, I have—more than once. The moment of dropping out in my career that I remember most clearly, or that left the deepest impression, relates to my first maternity leave, a long time ago now, in 1995. Because I did not know any better, I took a maternity leave of only six months, worrying already at the time about the hiatus in my reading and thinking the leave might cause. When I returned to work, the talk around the photocopier—the place in those days where colleagues talked!—was all about the relief and joy I must be feeling to have escaped the smell of nappies and the drag of feeding. I smiled along with the rest—and of course the talk was well intentioned—but privately I was aware only of sadness and panic: sadness at missing my baby, panic as I was still feeding him.

This mix of emotion then created further forms of stress and guilt, on all sides, including feelings in me of being tied to the baby, which I moreover sensed to be somehow bad or wrong, or, differently put, a condition that would hold me back. Feeling tied to motherhood was something that some of my women colleagues and friends at the time suggested was not part of the feminism we then advocated for. And I too felt, in some obscure way, that the baby was already keeping me back from the demanding reading, writing, and publishing schedule that I was committed to—that I knew an early-career academic, especially a woman, had to maintain to get anywhere.

The perception that made it worse was that I was, in fact, 'falling behind', no longer getting the references, not keeping up to speed with the readings. After all, there were more pressing schedules to keep to—like feeding every couple of hours. Moreover, exacerbating the situation was my awareness that my pre-baby schedule was, in any case, too demanding to maintain. So why flog myself so hard?

To explain further. Only two years prior, long before the baby became a reality, my head of department (HoD) summoned me to his office to have a word about my commitment. In his view, I had

an over-the-top commitment to my (creative) writing, and everything related to it: publicity events, promotions, marketing—involvements which often drew me away from the small city where the university was located. It should be a priority for me to settle down, he said, to adapt to departmental life, to fit these extracurricular commitments around my teaching.

In these more media-savvy days, it may read as unbelievable that an HoD could discourage an early-career colleague from impact-related activities, or advise on her personal life in this way. Yet the view was not untypical. In general, an academic job at that time was seen as incompatible with a writing life. I should knuckle down, my HoD went on, get stuck in. Thinking back, it is hardly imaginable that he could have given advice like this to a male early-career researcher, even then. But, in spite of all that, I did try to act on the advice. I understood it to be in my best interests. I went on writing and publishing flat out, but now late at night, and from Friday evening to Sunday late, when others relaxed. This, then, was the punishing schedule that having a baby made more difficult, and for some years impossible.

The gap in my personal bibliography relating to that maternity-leave period I have to this day. It did not happen again for my second baby, because I was prepared by then, and I had photocopied piles of material to read while feeding. But this gap—this sense of an insufficiency of knowledge, concentrated around 1995—has remained with me. For example, I remember going to a conference soon after coming off maternity leave that first time, and thinking to myself: what is everyone talking about? I was not aware of these articles, these books. And I remain unaware. Somehow, I have never found the time to do the extra reading pertaining to that year. It is something that I have worked hard to get beyond, but with qualified success.

J.G. You are both a writer of fiction and an academic. How do those two lives intersect, and what tensions can that cause? Do you view your fiction as a form of creative criticism, or is it entirely separate?

E.B. It is a question that, as the years have gone by, I have increasingly enjoyed answering. I used to avoid it; I became a bit covert and embarrassed about doing the creative work. But times have changed, and perceptions have changed, with the work of people

like Rachel Cusk and Deborah Levy: there are simply more of us around now, juggling different forms of writing. Early on, as in the second anecdote above, I was made to feel that perhaps the 'creative' work was not worthy in the same way as my 'academic' work was (both kinds are creative, of course).

When asked how I combined them, I would say flippant things, like, 'I write criticism when I am tired', or, 'I write fiction in the morning, when the juices are flowing; I would not waste that precious time on criticism'. Or I would cite the observation by Rudyard Kipling that he wrote with two different 'sides' of his head—the Indian side and the English side—and that he wrote prose and poetry from different sides.

But actually, for me, the creative–critical mix in my work happened quite naturally. And now it is where I am centred. The critical projects shadow the creative projects, or vice versa. So, to give an example, in 2000 I published my third novel, *Bloodlines*, a historical novel about the Irish in the Boer War. Incredibly, Irish soldiers fought on both sides in that war. I did a huge amount of historical research, and found so much that was also interesting from a critical, theoretical perspective, particularly around the politics of collaboration. The off-cuts of that research led to an academic book in 2002.

Likewise, when I was researching my short biography of Nelson Mandela, at the same time I was thinking about Pan-African links and connections, and the novel *Nile Baby* grew out of that mix. So, as opposed to the metaphor of working from two different sides of my brain—which was really just a way of pushing the question away—I now see creative writing and critical writing as two forms of writing that I do, which mobilise different levels of reflexivity.

J.G. You write biography, and you also write about life writing. One thing we are especially interested in is which parts of people's lives make their way into studies and analyses: which elements you might exclude or choose to include when writing a biography, and how that might differ from writing the self.

E.B. Oh, there are so many answers to that question, I do not know where to begin. In the life-writing work I have done to date, there has been quite a lot about writing the lives of the obscure: those left unrecorded by history, such as women across time. But, at the same time, I am very interested in heroism, regardless of gender. What character qualities, what elements of chance and good luck, go into the making of somebody who discovers something important and new, or galvanises and inspires people? So, for example,

with the Mandela biography, what I was really interested in doing—which no other biographer had done—was to look at the life and think about the particular moments and qualities, and the combination of moments and qualities, that produced this significant leader.

When it comes to my own life writing, I am interested in those obscure, ordinary aspects of lives that cannot quite be articulated in so many words, or are not describable as a condition. My novel *The Shouting in the Dark* is a portrait of a father's post-traumatic stress disorder. Nowadays, we have a language to describe that disorder, but in the novel I was interested in exploring a time when people did not have the linguistic instruments through which to

decode it, through which to heal it, through which to understand it. I am also quite interested in the patterns that lives fall into as they are lived.

When I wrote the Mandela biography, he was still alive, so there was a sense of open-endedness. I have recently published the second edition, now at a time when he is no longer with us. In this, I was changing all verbs to the past tense and therefore also thinking about the trajectory that his life took. To put it crudely: I found yet again that life mostly

does not fall into a linear upwards-and-onwards pattern; it is full of ups and downs.

J.G. And I suppose there is a tendency, retrospectively, to smooth things out—to tell a story that makes sense, as if it were all intentional. But in reality, in the moment, that is never the way those choices are made. That is one of the things we are interested in, too: avoiding that smoothing over; acknowledging those contingent, difficult moments, because they might actually be really significant.

You were just talking about narrating the unsayable, or the things that are unsayable up to a certain point. Could you say more about the kinds of narrative strategies you use, and about the capacity of art—of literature—to tell these kinds of stories in a way that a factual telling might not be able to?

E.B. I will take the same example of *The Shouting in the Dark* to answer that. I narrated the novel deliberately in the present tense, which is an incredibly demanding tense in which to produce life writing, precisely because it cannot assume a pattern; it cannot take that retrospective look. You are in the moment, literally with the speaker—here, the troubled father—as the story unfolds.

This allowed me to explore the question of how much the narrative voice knows about what is going on. I was faced with the interesting problem of how I was going to demonstrate that: how



Dropping In and Out, Interview with Elleke Boehmer, May 6 2025, University of Oxford

does the teenage narrator–protagonist know, or intuit, more than she can factually know? After a great deal of trial and error, what I came up with was a proscenium quality: we have a wakeful, insomniac narrator watching her father ranting night after night, eavesdropping on his shouting in the dark, as he tries to express and work out the drama that is unfolding in his memory.

She watches; she describes; she is in the moment. We, as readers, are in the present tense. She cannot understand what is going on, but she can see that something is amiss. The form and style—or, as you say, the narrative strategies—allow the art, the genre, in this case the novel, to reinforce the point being made.

M.t.H. That sense of needing to account for those difficult moments by being in them, and acknowledging them and talking about them, rather than folding them into something that is retrospectively made to make sense, or simply ignored—that is very, very interesting. And what draws you to the characters that you decide to write?

E.B. It is often the unexpected turn, or a quirky trait, that attracts my curiosity. In the research for *Bloodlines*, I remember finding out that during the Boer War the Boer guerrilla fighters carried copies of Dickens in their packs—Dickens in English, not in translation. So they were speaking Afrikaans, but when they paused for a rest, they took out their copies of Dickens.

Or, in the novel that I have just finished, *Ice Shock*, I explore the concept of what I call the far-away-close, or the distant-proximate, and how that might be believably expressed between people. It is a notion drawn from physics—‘spooky action at a distance’: the idea that people who know each other extremely well can find themselves doing the same things at the same time of day, even if they are very far apart. It is a conceptual problem that the narrative—the creative-critical narrative—allowed me to get a handle on, or get inside of, without full rational understanding.

M.t.H. A lot of your writing reflects intergenerational legacies and bonds. Is there any particularly female legacy—whether from an individual, a group, or a community—that is especially important to you?

E.B. To be totally honest, throughout my life I have probably always done the exact opposite of what my mother would have done. That is partly because of her generation: she migrated to South Africa from the Netherlands because my father wanted to go there. She did not want to; she was a homebody; throughout—until she eventually returned—she yearned for her home country, her home language. But she followed ‘her man’. I was probably always more outward-looking, and that was a source of conflict between us.

I have many times found it frustrating that women can be their own worst enemies, not least my mother (even though I know that this is a contradiction in myself, because I am often my own worst enemy, and a very harsh self-critic). In short, society does not encourage female self-confidence, and it subtly reinforced her lack

of it—even when it was plainly the case that what she was saying about herself simply was not true.

The flip side of those remarks is that I have often thought about what it would be like to be surrounded by really strong, inspiring women. I do not especially feel that I have had women like that around me as models, but I do hope that maybe some of what I have done might be helpful for my younger students, for example—even though my circumstances have been quite unique and a bit maverick.

J.G. Uniqueness and collective experience are things we are really interested in, too. How do you think we can narrate and account for shared, collective experiences without losing the individuality of the different lives we examine?

E.B. Curiously enough, I am currently writing a work of creative non-fiction, a kind of memoir, which raises the same question. I am calling it *Degree, Too*. The answer might lie in narrating parallel histories, in which women isolated within, until recently, male-dominated institutions tell their stories—stories that are both individual and collective.

To illustrate: what I am increasingly realising—something that was less clear to me at the time—is that to be a student here at Oxford in the 1980s was to be in a very strange place. Men’s colleges had agreed to admit women only a few years earlier. So we women students, those of us granted places at men’s colleges, were like islands— islands from which we desperately tried to throw ropes across to each other. We had to work actively at female bonding, as we were so few and far between. This was at once an individual and a collective experience that I shared with these other women.

Moreover, a number of these friends entered into relationships with lecturers—by definition older than themselves—in ways that would now be sanctioned but, at the time, boosted their sense of self-esteem, which was so beleaguered. Many of us had eating disorders and other anxiety-related issues, even while being constantly busy, trying to do our work in this man’s world.

If I had that part of my life over again, I would love not to have to do this: to take a break, from time to time, from the ceaseless treadmill. It never stopped turning, even when people landed jobs or went on maternity leave, as we were saying earlier. There was a moment in the 1990s and into the 2000s when you were often the only woman in your period or area within your department or faculty. So, of course, you were the women’s representative on committees, in addition to your day-to-day work, including other committee responsibilities.

What an era—not yet entirely over. Which is why I am writing this memoir: to bring some of these institutional issues back to the surface, and to analyse how we might better address them.

J.G. One of the things we want to do is to share strategies for mitigating this sort of thing. Have you evolved any strategies over

the course of your career for dealing with moments when things are harder, or when obstacles arise?

E.B. I became very good at speed reading, which helped with getting the work done. But otherwise, no, I do not think I have many good strategies to offer. A lot of the coping had to do with fire-fighting, and, unfortunately, that often continues to be the case.

J.G. And how do you deal with intersectionality in this kind of question? I know that you have thought about gender in relation to race, or about how gender can sometimes be subordinated to race.

E.B. It is a very complicated question, and again I do not necessarily have good answers. I will try another illustrative example. In my anti-apartheid work in the 1980s and 1990s, it was often said by the men in the room, of all races: let us participate in the race struggle first, and work on the gender struggle later; the former is more urgent. And I accepted that point at the time; it made sense to do so as a middle-class white woman.

But I now think that we could have been tougher and more resistant. We could have insisted on more nuanced debates about the implications of parking the gender struggle in favour of the democratic racial struggle: about what a more intersectional campaign might look like, and what its goals might be. This might have helped to address some of the divisions around gender that continue to trouble South Africa today, where the rape statistics are among the worst in the world. So I wish we could have been more decisive, and created a wall of solidarity with women comrades across sectors, in order to propagate those debates.

M.t.H. You have said things like that a couple of times—I wish I had done X; if I were to do Y again... It is really interesting to have that perspective, but also to think about whether those things would have been possible at the time. You are so constrained by a specific situation. I have done projects in Togo, in West Africa, and I think the different factors—being white, being a woman, and being younger or older—really complicate things for me.

You also find yourself being a product of who you are; you are stuck in that identity, and it affects how much you can move. You can say, I wish we could have done this. But maybe the harness you were in at that time would not have allowed it?

E.B. Yes, we are embodied beings, strapped into the harness of our different social and political contexts.

M.t.H. Maybe the heroic person can get out of that harness better than others. I do not know.

J.G. Something else we wanted to think more about was archives. How can we use existing archives, and what kinds of archives do we need for the future, to make feminist achieve-

ments more visible, but also to archive what is not there—to make those ‘dropped-out’ spots visible and meaningful?

E.B. I think I would simply encourage people who are interested in the archive, and in the silences and gaps around women’s lives, to keep reading while also questioning the archive. To interrogate the silent places. To keep sifting. Papers believed lost turn up all the time, and help to tell stories that we did not know about before.

M.t.H. So, finally, is there anything in particular that you think we should look at in this project?

E.B. Perhaps—this may sound perverse—I would suggest that we always keep the counterfactual in mind: to remember the ‘might have been’, the road not taken, and to consider how things may have turned out differently, which can sometimes throw up positives, or lessons to live by for the next generation.

To go back to the situation with my head of department in my first job, where I dutifully conceded, ‘Oh yes, I have been attending too many parties, been too busy with networking in London, I will try to knuckle down.’ With much reflection since, if I had that moment over again, I would say something different. Rather than feeling immediately that I had done the wrong thing, that I was not doing my job properly—reflecting that low professional self-esteem I mentioned earlier—could I have stood my ground more firmly? Could I have pointed out, respectfully, that I was being productive as a researcher despite the parties, that they were not detracting from my work? That it was not his role to rein me in, as he was attempting to do?

True, this is all ineffectual recuperation after the fact. It is like when you have an argument with somebody, and only later think, ‘Oh, darn, I should have said X; that would have been the perfect retort.’ As you can tell, I have replayed that conversation with my head of department in my mind for over thirty-two years.

And that leads me to one further suggestion: the need to address women’s low self-esteem, especially within institutions that have historically favoured men’s success. That is something I would love to see your project grapple with further.

Gender Studies and the 'Ausnahmefrauen'

A conversation with Hanne Loreck Vanessa Gravenor, Mathilde ter Heijne

V.G. Since 2004, you have been a Professor of Art Theory and Gender and Cultural Studies at HFBK-Hamburg, where you publish and teach on issues relating to contemporary art, feminisms, media studies, and psychoanalysis. We wanted to begin by asking if you have experienced moments of dropping out or non-linearity in your career?

H.L. I began studying art at a very inopportune time, which was also true in the broader sense in the University in Kassel at the time. Parallel to this, I took courses in German Studies and Philosophy. In particular, I was interested in Philosophy because there were simply better courses in that department. In the late 70s and early 80s, artistic instruction was simply catastrophic compared to what is offered today.

However, at some point, one asks oneself the question: What does one do with an art education? I believe I was always split between a deep interest in artistic theory and practice. The way I see it now, I think I learned much more from my work as an assistant at the Research Centre for Psychoanalysis, Psychotherapy, and Psychosocial, than from my formal studies. I worked at the centre to earn my living, but it was foundational for me because they thematically combined poststructural and psychoanalytical concepts. That was crucial for my way of seeing art, even today.

A further turning point came around the mid-80s when in Kassel something like Media Studies, as it is called today, was founded. Understanding media, not only as a technical form, but also in terms of how it shapes content as opposed to neutrally transporting it, had a profound impact on me. After my graduation, I began another Master's degree in Art Theory. I didn't complete it, however, because I was offered an internship at the Museum Education Office (Museumspädagogischer Dienst, today Museumsdienst) in Berlin. With the prospect of further education and practical experience, I was able to leave Kassel, which only in the documenta time was not a provincial town. This in turn led to other steps.

After my internship I was also open to shifting into curatorial work. In this period, following a position as a Research Associate in a large-scale art exhibition project, I curated a number of exhibitions with a cultural focus. Aside from this, I earned a doctorate late in life—at 39. The whole thing wasn't planned, but friends had repeatedly encouraged me to do more with my theoretical curiosity and my enjoyment of mediation/teaching: it all just happened, and I was able to use the qualification. Somewhat to my surprise, the written part of my graduate degree was published.

M.t.H. Interesting, so there were several shifts in your interests during your studies. Your priorities changed. If I understand correctly, you originally wanted to become an artist and then changed to focus on its reception?

H.L. Indeed; I had my own artistic practice that then took a back seat. But it nevertheless shapes the way I look at art even today, just like theoretical discourses do. I notice that I still view art differently to my art historically-oriented colleagues. They have a more illustrative relationship with art than I do. They see art as an instrument for theses and arguments, whereas I believe I can follow a certain element of the process of artistic production. For me, the way art materialises is relevant to its content.

In my work, artistic practice has its own position: rather than being something that I use as a critic or theorist, it is something that always remains separate, and I want to treat it in such a way. At the same time, it is clear that there is something I will never fully grasp in an artwork: something that exists independently and remains unaffected by art theory, art criticism, or "interpretations." That is my approach, and I think it is also the right way to engage with artistic production.

M.t.H. It's interesting that you say that. I often get the impression that artists are frequently the subject of projections in the reception of their work or in art criticism. There often seems to be an expectation that they embody exactly what one believes to see in their art, and that their work means exactly what one wants to read into it. This expectation can be very restrictive, or even act as a mechanism of exclusion if artists do not fit into the prescribed norm.

H.L. When an exchange with an artist is successful—either in person or through writing—something reciprocal can also develop: a marginalised artist can gain new perspectives on her own work through my view, my knowledge, and my associations. Exactly because I am not her, but looking from the outside and with a theoretical approach to the work. I have a productive distance. Frequently I have received feedback that my texts have clarified something that was not cognizant for the artist before, sometimes even something that has continued or changed within her practice since the production of the work in question. I don't see myself as a mouthpiece or a critic, but rather as an author who reflects on aesthetic and social conditions in the context of contemporary and historical contexts—always with an eye to the position of the producer.

V.G. As you mentioned, you began your education at the end of the 70s and into the 80s. At this time, gender relations and dynamics were very different to how they are today. How did this impact you and your decisions to focus your work, for example on the photographer Cindy Sherman, and later on other feminist discourses?

H.L. In the late 70s and early 80s, all professors who were teaching were male, not just in Kassel, but in all the German art academies. There was not one single artistic teaching position that was held by a woman; art was male. All art students could understand that, whether that was directly or implicitly felt. The feminist discourse, which was still in its infancy, originated in art studies and art history and was taught through teachers with temporary contracts (Lehraufträge). This informed my dissertation topic 'Geschlechterfiguren und Körpermodelle: Cindy Sherman' (Gender Figures and Body Models: Cindy Sherman), which to some extent took a step back from art history, since it dealt with a contemporary position.

The decision to focus on Cindy Sherman and a photographic position had less to do with the photographic medium as a technology and more the form of performance of female subjects, through masquerades and different roles, whose respective results were then captured using the medium of photography. That was very important. But even more important for me was the non-identity based, anti-essentialist and subject-critical figuration of gender. Therefore, my thesis differs from countless discussions of Cindy Sherman's position, including the feminist debates surrounding her. There is also a feminist mainstream and not just one feminist theory, no uniform feminist view of art per se. Today one speaks of intersectionality and queer feminist perspectives and of subjectivisation.

V.G. You mentioned what marked your scholarship as a feminist scholar was a focus on positions that are non-identity based and non-essentialist. You have also conducted a number of experimental publication projects that are collaborative. The artist Katrin Mayer invited you to her platform *c0da*¹, a network of artists and writers producing texts around the notions of coding, stitching, and weaving. From there, you formed a theory surrounding the zerological subject from Mayer's work, who inspired you to look into the early career of Anni Albers, the German-Jewish émigré artist who worked in textiles and print-

making. Can you elaborate on some of these projects and your methods?

H.L. I think the starting point for me in this context was actually my engagement with Anni Albers—but not in a monographic manner. I found it interesting to combine a long-ignored position within art history with a contemporary position. Namely Katrin Mayer, who has studied Albers and has made her specific approach to textiles in space a kind of reference point in her own artistic research. In doing so, she has also inscribed herself into an art-historical network, which I found very interesting.

That's when I got involved again, similarly from a feminist perspective—but also as an art studies scholar (Kunstwissenschaftlerin). This has evolved further, among other things through the project *c0da*¹, including the online publication and exhibition, which was initiated by Katrin Mayer. Within the same framework, I gave a lecture last year in which I proposed to rethink the female subject from a feminist perspective,

on a theoretical level—also integrating questions surrounding coding and representation and the like.

My aim was to posit a different order—beyond the classic juxtaposition of zero and one, female and male. I was less interested in the history of technology itself, as discussed, for example, in relation to the Jacquard loom, and more interested in the principle of binary and how it can be expanded or condensed. I see this as a type of taking on of the baton from the earlier work of others. This perspective does not discount or override the work of the previous person (in this case Katrin Mayer). Her approach of making the historical 'coders' visible and audible, together with a reflection on the way in which they were suppressed, forgotten, or excluded, inspired me greatly. I wanted to figure more as a connector and somebody who expands the field—to strengthen the fabric, so to speak, without questioning the authorship of her work.

V.G. *c0da* and *Dropping In and Out* both feel like feminist projects that critique the pressure to be constantly visible. Are there ways artists can gain visibility or capital without putting themselves front and centre—and how does your upcoming monograph on camouflage frame this as a possible counter-strategy?

H.L. I realised for the first time that the topic of *Camouflage*² has a

¹ *c0da* is a research project and publishing platform conceived by artist Katrin Mayer that deals with feminist modes of coding and writing. It interweaves the herstory of the internet with herstories of writing. <https://www.c0da.org/>. Hanne Loreck, 'Zerologische Subjekt und topologische Figuration', *c0da*, <https://www.c0da.org/contributions/zerologisches-subjekt-und-topologische-figuration>.

² Hanne Loreck, *Camouflage. Kunst und Kulturen der Tarnung*, Hamburg: textem verlag 2026 (forthcoming).



Dropping In and Out, Interview with Hanne Loreck, May 23 2025, University of the Arts, Berlin

lot to do with the way I see myself as a subject. If I could, I'd live masked. I don't feel uncomfortable speaking about myself directly, I just don't like doing it. For me, this is a strategy to resist the pressure of constant self-promotion. Right now, in the Academic context or on social media, I feel very strongly the pressure to be visible, and I feel uneasy with it. There are students who understand my reservation as a weakness but for me it is a conscious decision—also against the egocentrism and commercialism in the art world. Maybe I am rather a prime example of someone who doesn't define herself through visibility but through context and relationality.

M.t.H. Have there been moments in your career when you faced setbacks or shifts — times when asserting yourself was difficult, when your work wasn't seen, or when your resources and ambitions no longer matched?

H.L. My first experience came from school: first, in the second grade of high school when I was involved in leadership and was considered too articulate (and from a middle-class family in a rural, what today would be called educationally disadvantaged, environment) by the boys. That influenced me a lot. The next time was also not minor. At that time, feminists, and by that I mean feminist organised groups in higher education, had a very clear style. When you wore lipstick, well that just wouldn't do—as if appearance represented a political stance. I often noticed what, in my opinion, were very bizarre, unwritten rules that one had to adhere to as a feminist or an artist in order to be heard, even in left-wing alternative circles, for example in the representation of marginalised positions. I always found it hard to find a middle ground.

M.t.H. When I started living and working in Germany 25 years ago, there was still the notion of the 'Ausnahmefrau' (women of exception)—a woman regarded as a positive example of diversity within an otherwise male collective. But there could only be one. The presence of more women was often seen as a threat—both to the male collective and to the 'Ausnahmefrau' herself. Today, this term has largely disappeared, as such 'exceptions' are no longer framed in the same way. At the time, however, this label existed—you were, so to speak, given the green check mark of approval. Another characteristic of the 'Ausnahmefrau' was that she herself would often act to keep potential competitors—other women—out of higher career positions. Have you observed or experienced this dynamic yourself, either personally or within your professional environment?

H.L. 'Ausnahme' [exception] that seems to me to be an almost neutral way of putting it, but the (political) alibi position is perhaps much tougher. Nevertheless, I'd like to say that, despite all the legal progress made in terms of equality, it has actually become more complicated to realise. By this I mean that the establishment of gender mainstreaming and equal opportunities officers who represent marginalised subjects within institutions has not closed

the gap between what happens on the surface, in terms of better numbers, such as the more balanced distribution of teaching positions between women and men, and the subtle, above all 'symbolic' forms of ignorance.

MtH. How did you deal with that? During that time, the label 'Ausnahmefrau' was probably also projected onto you—even though, with your feminist stance, you yourself had nothing to do with this exclusionary attitude.

H.L. Even if around the year 2000 I may have been some type of 'Ausnahmefrau', I neither felt that way nor saw myself in that manner. And yes, you can always distinguish between 'glass half full' and 'glass half empty', and I'm afraid I tend to be on the side of the half-empty glass. In 2004, I arrived at the Art Academy (Hochschule für bildende Künste Hamburg). After this, I became tenured in my Art Theory and Gender Studies position. In 2006, I became Vice President. It is by no means anecdotal to note here that the appointment of this very 'gender position' had been prevented for over three years by male artists, out of vague fears that it would undermine the symbolic capital of their teaching and art. I was offered the position of Vice President based on the fact that gender quotas in the executive committee needed to be filled and at the time; there weren't that many women who wanted to take on such a role. In addition, at that time, only a few female colleagues had been appointed, most of whom had no interest in this job, which always polarizes opinion and provokes ambivalent reactions. There was certainly also a kind of imagined divide between artistic and theoretical teaching positions: the latter was considered to be language-oriented or always articulated verbally; prerequisites for discussions not only within the executive committee itself, but also with academic delegations. The fact that I was considered for the position of Vice President probably also had to do with the fact that I was perceived as structurally minded and critical, but also as a potential mediating voice.

Careers in Underdrive

Vanessa Gravenor on Olive Mudie-Cooke, Otilie Wilhelmine Roederstein

Dear XX,

I am writing you this letter at a time when letters are no more—only sent between sentimental lovers. As such, I feel ill at ease addressing you, unknown, posthumous reader, in the first person singular, I.

Walter Benjamin wrote that he only allowed himself to use the pronoun 'I' in letter writing: the reason, he claimed, for his excellent German.¹ However, he wrote many letters during his lifetime to Gershom Scholem, Bertolt Brecht, Hannah Arendt, Kitty Steinschneider... These confidants are the reason why his work survived and lived on, even before his untimely suicide, with the Gestapo on his heels. But returning to what I wanted to address: his legacy lived on only because of his bad German—the letter writing and the relationships he maintained with friends. For this type of writing, he did allow his 'I' to slip in. Aloophole. The letter. As a lesson, maybe we should all allow ourselves a bit of sentimentality when addressing those in the time after. You, my reader.

Dear XX,

I am writing you this letter from the margins. Which margin? I will begin with the geographical one. In my practice, I have been drawn to peripheral regions that are often overlooked. Where militarised activities and threats play out on landscapes, geographies, but also minds, bodies, and imaginations. Now I am writing to you from that peripheral place, a rural one, where I gaze at the sea twice a day and revel in unstructured time. Simple time for work and rest.

Yet rural life takes some adjusting to: its rhythms, flows, sounds, and cadences. Slowing down. Slowing myself down at the editing desk, or at the one from which I am writing now.

The scholar Tina Campt writes about slow watching in Arthur Jafa's video work, both a watching performed by the onlooker and a labour the artist/editor performs.² Slow watching allows the viewer to examine the differences between experiences, to do the work required to recognise how the 'I' is possibly different from the 'them' the 'I' is watching. When meditating slowly on visuals of racial violence—circulating images of Black death, but also Black joy, such as in Jafa's *Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death* (2016)—a slowness of looking is required. Campt calls this hapticity. That is something that enters the image field like a feeling, a rhythm, a hum. This watching through the Black gaze is an abhorrent refusal of spectatorship.³ How can this hapticity enter other images that have not been slowed down, stilled, or stalled? Within images from other times, there is also an asymmetry of vision, even though this asymmetry does not equal the first one.

Dear XX,

I am writing you this letter from a far-away land. In Chris Marker's essay-film language, this letter would be a travel log, a dance between image and text. The image would be from a foreign place, like Siberia.⁴ The text from the intimate place: the voice and void of the narrator who is out of time and place.

Nora M. Alter explains that critics of the film essay describe this authorial position as a solipsistic one from which to write, and that the video essay bears the risk of portraying only the self, rather than the locality or community.⁵ I hold on to the hope that the essay film can also unsettle the 'I' by merging the documentary with fiction, thereby creating potential subjects—dreamt subjects—that flit and crawl backwards in time.

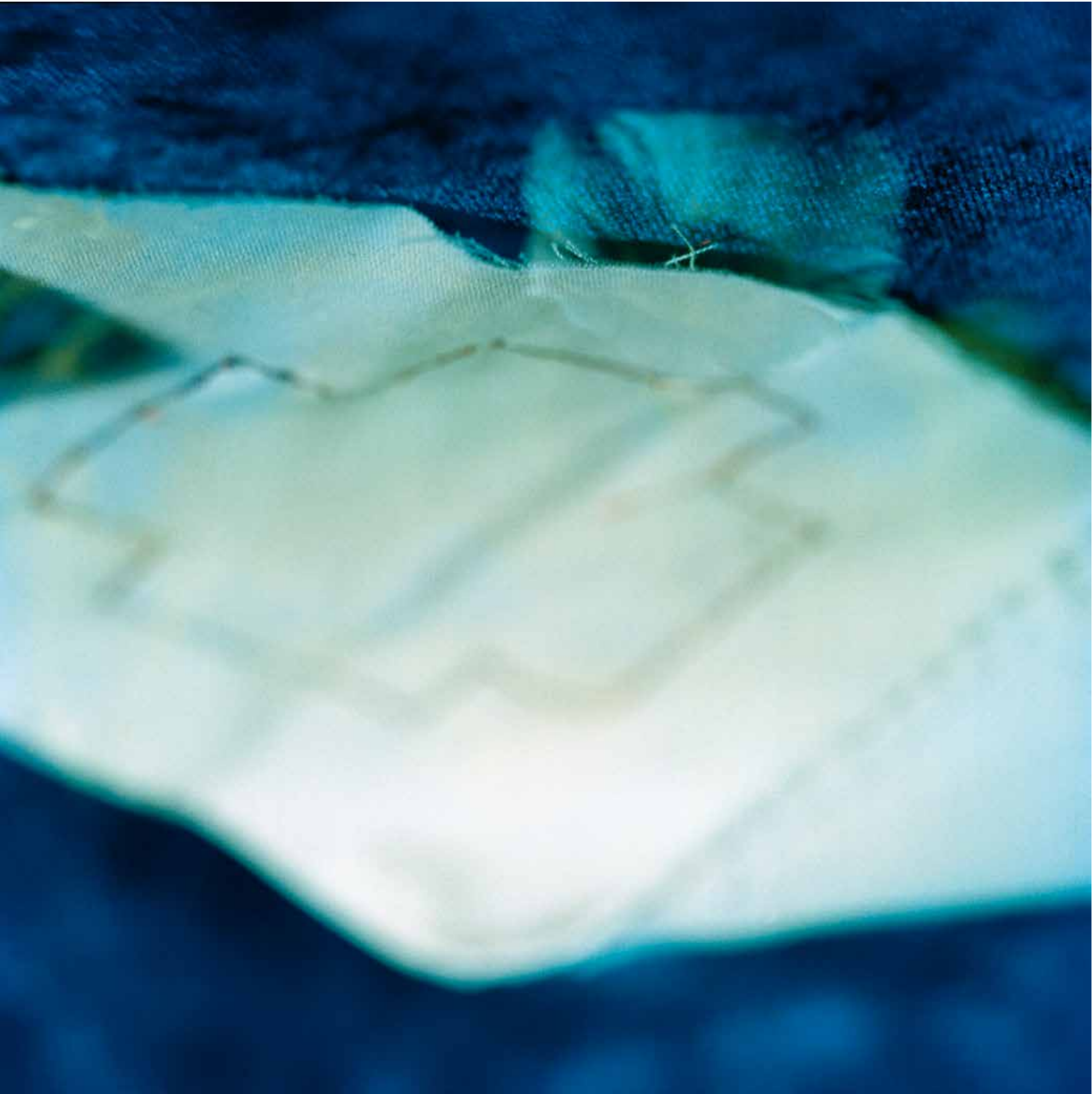
¹ Walter Benjamin, *Autobiographische Schriften: Berliner Chronik*, in: *Gesammelte Schriften VI*, ed. by R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag 1985), pp. 465–519 (p. 475).

² Tina Campt, 'The Visual Frequency of Black Life', in *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 77–106 (p. 104).

³ Tina Campt, 'Prelude to a Black Gaze', in *A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021), pp. 1–24 (p. 17).

⁴ Chris Marker begins the voice-over in *Letters from Siberia*: 'I'm writing you this letter from a distant land. Its name is Siberia.' Chris Marker, *Letters from Siberia* (France, 1957), 1 h 1 min.

⁵ Nora M. Alter, 'Introduction', in *The Essay Film: After Fact and Fiction, Film and Culture series*, ed. by John Belton (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), pp. 1–30 (pp. 10–11).



Vanessa Gravenor, *Careers In Underdrive:*
Image Tissues, photograph, 2026

Dear XX,

I have been asking myself: how do artists transmit images to the next generation? Can this transmission be a pillar of filmmaking? The most vivid images that have been transmitted to me were done so by those closest to me—those images that arrived from within myself, from somebody who was of my own likeness.

In an earlier version of this text, I wrote about my grandmother's and grandfather's passing on of their experiences of exile and flight after the Second World War. Although I never thought of these as war images, and as cameras were scarce, in fact they are. They carried only a few portraits with them to Canada on their migration route as Jews from Poland. But these are not the images I speak about when I speak of 'transmitted images'. I speak of images—some of loss, others of love—in the broader sense. These, too, are portable images.

Those who pass on such images are also artists, artists by accident or coincidence, like the amateur. These are flesh images, coded into tissue. I will endeavour to write from this place, however uncomfortable it is.

Dear XX,

I am writing to you about my next project in development. It is a film about after-images of women and non-binary photographers who photographed war/violence at the beginning of the twentieth century. Even though it is a project about history, I plan to build a bridge to the present, connecting past stories to other workers who labour on the construction line of digital and algorithmic images: content moderators. Maybe this can be a bridge where the past can inform the present, with the present writing back to the past.

Burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder from images.

I became interested in the topic after visiting the exhibition 'Remapping Memories' in late 2024. The exhibition, which was installed at the Museum der 'Trostfrauen' in Berlin-Moabit,⁶ was organised by the curator and artist Oksana Yushko and showcased the archivist Arthur Bondar's archival photographs by the now-deceased photographer Olga Ignatovich, alongside other archival photographs and photographic positions drawn from Second World War negatives. Bondar is researching and staging Olga's photographic legacy, including her photographs of the liberation of Auschwitz, which became iconic but were attributed to her more famous brother, Boris Ignatovich, for the Red Army.⁷

Olga Ignatovich's post-war career, for that matter—was also complicated by burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder, difficult to quantify in the photographic negatives. Her photographic work remains credited collectively under the Ignatovich Team [Brigada Ignatovich], as explained by both Arthur Bondar but also Irina Chmyreva. Chmyreva further elaborates that in the early 1930s in Moscow, women but also Jewish women were integrated into the photographic profession, however, often through co-mingling of familial and amorous relations. Their names generally were lumped under the legacies of their male fathers or brothers.⁸

This complicated gender relations or feminism from the East can give way to what Anastasia Kolas calls the aesthetics of 'disappointment' in the face of the archive in post-Soviet contexts.⁹ This disappointment is also driven by the false promise of feminism from the East: the figure of the new Soviet woman, who was an integral part of the workforce during and after the Second World War. Where, in the West, women had been mobilised to fill wartime labour shortages, they were quickly 'put back into the kitchen', as Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead write in their article 'What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?'¹⁰ In socialism, domestic labour such as childcare, laundry, and other forms of care work was integrated into the inner workings of the state, and yet the state's approach to gender equality was 'top-down', or an 'emancipation from above': reflected in public life but not in the private sphere.¹¹ This leads the authors to the claim—based on empirical studies—that women often noticed little difference in their personal lives as systems shifted from socialism to post-socialist communism to democracy.¹² Across these systems, women remained burdened with domestic labour and were often subject to violence in the home.

6 The Museum der 'Trostfrauen' translates into English as the Museum of the 'Comfort Women'. The museum documents women who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during the Second World War. The exhibition *Remapping Memories* itself constitutes an example of multidirectional memory: the exhibition space is remapped to host a temporary exhibition featuring a selection from Arthur Bondar's archive of Second World War negatives, comprising over 30,000 images. Most of the photographs originate from photographers working in Central and Eastern Europe.

7 Cf. Arthur Bondar ed., Olga Ignatovich, *In the Shadow of the Big Brother* (WWII Arthur Bondar Collection, 2025).

8 Irina Chmyreva, "Introduction," Olga Ignatovich, *In the Shadow of the Big Brother*, ed. by Arthur Bondar (WWII Arthur Bondar Collection, 2025), pp.1-5 (pp.1-2).

9 Anastasia Kolas draws on the term disappointment in relation to her grandmother's filmic archive at Belarus Film Media. She uses the term to describe the affective tension produced when artists' legacies are embedded in state propaganda: contexts in which women often occupied central positions in professional life while remaining marginalised in their private lives, frequently confronting domestic violence.

10 This text came to my attention through Anastasia Kolas's ongoing bibliographic work. See Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead, 'What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?', *Catalyst*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2018), pp. 101–133.

11 Kristen R. Ghodsee and Julia Mead, 'What Has Socialism Ever Done for Women?', *Catalyst*, vol. 2, no. 2 (2018), pp. 101–133 (p. 104).

12 Ghodsee and Mead draw in particular on studies conducted in Romania spanning the transition from communist dictatorship to democracy; see Ghodsee and Mead, 'What Has



Vanessa Gravenor, *Careers In Underdrive:*
Falling Into Monochrome, photograph, 2026

On the other end of the ideological spectrum, I have been watching the biographical film *Lee*, which portrays Lee Miller, who also photographed the liberation of Auschwitz, but from the perspective of the Allied soldiers. Her career, too, is fractured by domestic life, child-rearing, and alcoholism, the latter likely linked to undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. Following her work as a photographer during the Second World War—capturing some of the most iconic images of the conflict—her post-war life resulted in the artist going, metaphorically and literally, back into the kitchen. She lost her artistic career, although her legacy survives because her kin—her son—continue to tend to her archive.

Socialism Ever Done for Women?',
Catalyst, vol. 2, no. 2 (2018), pp.
101–133 (p. 108).

These biographies and staged legacies lead me to other historical artists who experienced similar fates after looking and imaging, namely Olive Mudie-Cooke and Otilie Wilhelmine Roederstein. In between, I encounter the names of additional artists whose work was impacted by bereavement and disorder, although such disorder is difficult to read across time, geography, position, and identity beyond gender. These include Swarnakumari Devi, Mary Riter Hamilton, Sella Hasse, and Sarojini Naidu. Swarnakumari Devi and Sarojini Naidu write about loss during the First World War from afar, in colonial India, where women were addressed in intimate letters sent by husbands and sons, some of whom never returned, but whose memories lived on in their correspondence.

Further study is needed on the lives of women and non-binary people in colonial and post-colonial India, and on how these histories differ from Western feminisms. In their fractured differences, these biographies and their readings are peripheral stories, sung from the margins, but they nonetheless belong to a 'war image'.

Dear XX,

I am writing you this letter from a place of closeness, maybe even nearness. I have been thinking a lot about close-ups in the cinematic sense. I started to think about the equivalent of the close-up in sound. In both cases, context is implicit, but without the wide shots, without background noise, that context would not exist. What if we were simply to cut out the wide shots and stay with the close-ups? This would lead to some uncomfortable watching, but perhaps also to a strange intimacy.

These days, I have been reading about the lives and works of Olive Mudie-Cooke and Otilie Wilhelmine Roederstein, in part because of the accessibility of their archives from the position from which I write, geographically located in Berlin, a transitional zone from West to East. Although the archives containing both artists' works are perhaps geographically adjacent—one archive in London, the other in Frankfurt—the women have little in common, except for the fact that they were artists living on two opposing sides of the line of fire. Their visual languages speak in different registers.

I take a step back from my interest in photographers from the Second World War and go back in time. I rewind to replay.

The term 'artist', as we define it today in a multidisciplinary manner, fits only loosely around my protagonists. For Mudie-Cooke, she was an ambulance driver who had been trained as an artist, but who changed her profession when the war broke out, along with much of the population. Parallel to this new vocation, she drew in her spare time and was commissioned by the Woman's War Committee towards the end of the First World War. Her artistic works—her war images—are based on memories from her work as an ambulance driver, but also on specific trips during which she experienced the war for the first time as an artistic spectator.

Are her paintings realistic; do they show the grit and violence of the battlefield? Not necessarily. The images are highly managed, almost censored. A line outlines the shadow of an ambulance car cutting through snow, but there is no blood. Another painting shows a nurse lighting a cigarette for her patient. These are images, to some extent, of war beautified, as so often happens in retrospect.

Some years after the war ended, Olive Mudie-Cooke committed suicide. The reason for this is not provided by the Imperial War Museum, which holds the artist's estate. Searching the internet, I find a comment suggesting that

the suicide resulted from a break-up with a lover: speculation? A woman's death? The act, nonetheless, allows some emotion to leak out of the quietly controlled watercolours and sketches that comprise the artist's oeuvre, much of which was not commissioned but entered the museum's collection by donation. This excess indicates that not all was controlled in the artist's intimate sphere. It points to a hidden domestic life that is all but missing from the 'official' artist's estate.

Dear XX,

I have been trying to collect my thoughts on Otilie Wilhelmine Roederstein. My research is still ongoing. She was a successful portraitist who lived a life, in many ways, in defiance of social conventions. She lived with her partner, Elizabeth Winterhalter, in Frankfurt, and later moved into rural life, where they were both involved in the social fabric of the village and in women's education.

Although her portraits are technically crafted with precision and dedication, they are not what interests me most. I am interested in the period when she fell out of her career, when her success as a portrait artist dwindled because of political tensions in Germany at the beginning of the twentieth century. Her paintings fall into monochrome, using sharp, angular lines and contours. She paints herself, as well as flowers. She loses contact with the exterior world.

In contrast with British women, I do not find any German women who were officially commissioned to paint the First World War.

Instead, I want to discover the works that have survived, but have done so on the margins of memory. It is a way of paying homage, and of disrupting the economic and social conditions of the art world that create icons and record just the one instead of the many. Even for that chosen 'one', the community or network of production often falls out of the record, but there are possible readings, speculations, and poetic interventions through which the network can resurface from the particles of many 'I's.

That is where you will find me.

Yours,

V.

Dropping In and Out – Strategies of Visibility, Memory, and Curatorial Responsibility

Heike Munder on Heidi Bucher, Phyllida Barlow, and Maria Pinińska-Bereś

My contribution bears the title 'Dropping In and Out - Strategies of Visibility, Memory, and Curatorial Responsibility'. It is conceived as a personal reflection that has emerged from my curatorial practice, and as an articulation of a position that has taken shape over years of working with women artists whose biographies did not follow the linear narratives of continuous success, but were instead marked by ruptures, phases of invisibility, and withdrawal—and, at the same time, by persistence, resilience, and an unwavering continuity.

In parallel, this paper is also a self-reflection on my own curatorial position. Since the early 2000s, I have sought, through exhibitions and programmatic work, to open up and diversify the structures of a male-dominated art field. My aim has never been to reproduce or reinforce roles of victimhood, but rather to develop alternative models of visibility and authenticity. At its core, this undertaking is not about compensating for presumed deficits, but about asking how interruptions, breaks, and irregularities might themselves be understood as productive—on aesthetic, biographical, as well as institutional levels.

An early point of departure for my curatorial practice was the observation, in the 1990s and early 2000s, that female positions in art history were often marginalised or altogether absent. With exhibitions such as 'It's Time for Action (There's No Option). About Feminism' (2006), which I curated at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich, I attempted to render intergenerational networks visible: between older artists such as Yoko Ono and Katharina Sieverding, and a younger generation including Mathilde ter Heijne, Patty Chang, or Anat Ben-David. The aim was to provide references and models—not only for women artists but equally for young curators such as myself.

Already at that time, the question arose concerning the role of the curator as gatekeeper: which forms of access do I enable; which structural conditions can I help to shape? Within this reflection, I discerned a recurring pattern: many successful women artists avoided speaking publicly about their position as women, or about the structural obstacles they had encountered. Visibility was purchased through silence. 'Never be a victim' became a tacit maxim—equality was lived quietly and persistently, but without publicly articulating the obstacles encountered along the way.

A particularly striking example: a renowned artist once confided in me that, to this day, she has never told anyone in the art world that she has two children—out of fear that such knowledge could harm her career. That such an attitude remains a reality in the 2020s points to the persistence of patriarchal structures, and to the anticipatory obedience that many women continue to enact. Men can speak about family without reputational risk; women, by contrast, risk having their professionalism called into question.

My own experience confirms this. When I became a mother, it felt self-evident to bring my daughter with me on trips and to conferences. In Colombia, where I was attending an international gathering, I privately organised a babysitter and driver so that I could act independently. To my surprise, and indeed to my dismay, it was particularly my female colleagues who withdrew from me. Once accompanied by a child, I was situated in the realm of the personal, no longer perceived as a full participant in the professional field. This double standard—which relegates women to the margins the moment they render family responsibilities visible—remains troubling. And yet, I persist in this practice, for I feel equally responsible to my daughter and to my work.



Heidi Bucher (in a Bodyshells) Los Angeles CA. 1971

What I wish for is greater fluidity: less rigid separation between the private and professional spheres, more permeability, and a fuller recognition of life realities that do not conform to normative role models. For it is precisely this permeability that opens potentials for new forms of visibility, authenticity, and solidaristic practice.

The central insights of my curatorial practice stem from concrete encounters with the biographies of women artists—biographies shaped by ruptures, invisibility, delayed recognition, and yet also by persistence, continuity, and unwavering commitment. Three examples—Heidi Bucher, Phyllida Barlow, and Maria Pinińska-Bereś—illustrate paradigmatic strategies for negotiating prolonged institutional invisibility and socially imposed role expectations.

Heidi Bucher (1926–1993) developed her large-scale latex sculptures and so-called Bodyshells in the 1970s in California, where she lived with her husband and two children. During this period, she cultivated a vital network within the American art scene. Yet upon her return to Switzerland, she entered a phase of isolation. As a single mother, her life became far less fluid; at the

same time, she consistently integrated her two sons into her artistic practice from the very beginning—they assisted her in many of her works. It was during this period that she created her renowned ‘skins’ (Häutungen) of spaces—most often of patriarchal origin. These were radical gestures of self-empowerment that remained largely unnoticed by the institutional field. Broader recognition came only two decades after her death. In 2004–05, I curated her first retrospective, a project made possible above all by the decisive involvement of her sons, Mayo and Indigo Bucher. At that time, the rediscovery of women artists was still considered of little professional prestige; women were scarcely integrated into the art market of the early 2000s. Accordingly, the exhibition generated neither immediate reputation for Bucher nor for myself, but it set crucial processes in motion: her oeuvre entered circulation, networks began to take shape, and in the long term this led—most visibly through the large retrospective at Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2021—to her international breakthrough. This example demonstrates clearly: individual curatorial efforts are insufficient; sustainable visibility requires networks of institutions, galleries, and media.

Phyllida Barlow in her Studio, 2018 ©
Phyllida Barlow Estate Courtesy the Phyllida Barlow Estate and Hauser

Phyllida Barlow (1944–2023), by contrast, spent decades as a professor at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, shaping generations of artists. Her own artistic practice receded into the background for many years—full-time teaching and family responsibilities left little time and few opportunities for the realisation of her projects. Only after her retirement did a process of rediscovery begin in the 2000s, initially through artist-run spaces such as Studio Voltaire in London, which provided her with a platform. With her inclusion in the programme of Hauser & Wirth, the institutional and material framework opened up for the realisation of the monumental sculptures that had until then existed only as sketches. Her career thus stands as exemplary of late recognition—recognition which, unlike Bucher or Pinińska-Bereś, she was fortunate enough to experience and shape in her lifetime.

Maria Pinińska-Bereś (1931–1999) is the artist whose work I am currently engaging with most intensively. I first encountered it around 2000 in Kraków. Shortly before her death,

she had prepared a major retrospective at Bunkier Sztuki, the opening of which she did not live to see. Internationally, she remained almost entirely unknown—due not least to her deliberate self-positioning as a female artist, making pink and white the signature colours of her work, and thereby provoking the male-dominated Polish art scene in which her husband, Jerzy Bereś, was firmly established. Although they shared a studio, she was largely ignored. Her works were dismissed as ‘too intimate’ or ‘too personal’. Yet she remained steadfastly true to her practice, using it to comment on both the social fabric and the political tensions of Poland.

Pinińska-Bereś's oeuvre demonstrates how taboos can be turned into aesthetic resources. Pink—long rejected as a clichéd, sexualised colour—became for her a subversive tool. In performances such as *Laundry I* (1979) and *Laundry II* (1981), she transformed domestic practices into political gestures. Using a washboard that she had once employed for her daughter's nappies, she made the word ‘feminism’ emerge. When male colleagues disrupted *Laundry II* by throwing dirty laundry into her tub, she converted this act of disturbance into a quiet yet resistant performance. Her art challenged the monumentality of male sculptural traditions by developing a corporeal, fragile language—fabrics, latex, textile ‘psycho-furniture’.

Her position in the 1990s and early 2000s was difficult to situate. On the one hand, she could not unreservedly align herself with Western feminism—Poland's socialist context had propagated gender equality, while simultaneously reproducing entrenched patriarchal structures. On the other hand, her open embrace of female sexuality and eroticism was equally taboo in the Western art discourse of the time. I was fascinated by the materiality and themes of her work, yet also unsettled, fearing that the explicitly feminine connotation of her practice would scarcely resonate—whether in Zurich or internationally. This was in marked contrast to Bucher, whose material aesthetics could be more easily inscribed into established sculptural traditions.

Today, an international retrospective that I co-curate with Jarosław Suchan seeks to reposition Pinińska-Bereś within a broader canon.¹ The achievement here does not lie in a singular project but in the collective, long-term collaboration of

multiple institutions. Once again, the family has played a central role—above all her daughter, Bettina Bereś, and her husband, who, through the establishment of the Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Jerzy Bereś Foundation, have enabled sustainable work with the artist's estate.

What unites all three cases—Bucher, Barlow, and Pinińska-Bereś—is an ethos of persistence and resilience. These artists demonstrate that ruptures can be turned into productive strategies: as acts of self-empowerment, as vehicles of long-term visibility, and as impulses for rewriting art history.

At the core of these biographies is not the construction of a victim narrative, but rather the capacity to transform breaks, interruptions, and phases of invisibility into productive strategies. Discontinuities, withdrawals, and the breaking of taboos do not appear as deficits but as constitutive elements of aesthetic practice. They generate alternative narratives—non-linear, layered, and profound.

For curatorial work, this means understanding the fragmentary, the private, and the invisible not as shortcomings, but as epistemic resources. Domains such as sexuality, motherhood, and care work—long marginalised or tabooed—can, from this perspective, be read as productive starting points for aesthetic innovation. Visibility, however, does not arise automatically; it requires processes of repetition, translation, and institutional embedding. Individual exhibitions may set impulses, but sustainable structures emerge only through networks—between



Maria Pinińska-Bereś, Porträt. Foto:
Courtesy Maria Pinińska-Bereś and Jerzy Bereś Foundation

1 'Maria Pinińska-Bereś', international retrospective, co-curated with Jarosław Suchan, shown at the National Museum in Wrocław (July–October 2024), Galerie für zeitgenössische Kunst Leipzig (November 2024–January 2025), Kunstmuseum Den Haag (March–August 2025), and Kunstmuseum Luzern (February–July 2026).

institutions, galleries, media, and colleagues. Solidarity among women is by no means self-evident; patriarchal patterns reproduce themselves within the field. Motherhood often remains taboo: those who bring children visibly into the public sphere of the art world continue to risk exclusion. This makes it all the more necessary to establish new models that render the boundaries between professional and personal life more permeable.

Curating, for me, does not mean devising strategies that promise rapid visibility. Visibility is not a commodity to be 'produced' through operative measures; it is a relational process. In this sense, I understand curatorial practice as translation, repetition, and reframing. It is about creating spaces of resonance where non-dominant voices can be heard, and about building networks, since only collective action enables structural transformation.

Curatorial responsibility therefore entails more than simply making women artists visible. It involves the development of counter-hegemonic practices that foreground alternative models of work, life, and art history. At its centre stands authenticity—understood as the right not to submit to normative social obedience. Artists, curators, indeed all actors in the field, should not be disciplined by the logic of 'anticipatory compliance', but rather be able to open spaces in which fluid biographies are conceivable.

Non-linear temporalities—interruptions, withdrawals, breaks—should not be marked as failures, but understood as expressions of another form of duration and continuity. Curatorial ethics thus entails recognising these fragmented temporalities and treating them as both aesthetic and epistemic resources. To curate, then, also means to reread archives, to decentre dominant narratives, and to institutionalise open working methods. It means acknowledging biographies long marked as 'deficient' as epistemic counter-narratives, and creating networks grounded not in competition but in solidaristic practices. Only in this way can curatorial responsibility become a form of institutional critique that not only analyses but also opens new spaces for action.

Letters to My Selves – Diaries and Other Letter Archives

Mathilde ter Heijne

JUNE 15, 2025 - DROPPING OUT OR FAILING?

Dear me, dear artist,

I know that you feel exhausted.
 You've felt this way for some years now, haven't you?

You've asked ChatGPT the embarrassing question: "dropping out or failing?". It answered: "You are not failing because you lack talent or insight. You may be:

- carrying invisible labour
- lacking access to capital
- navigating a system not built for you
- confronting an exceptional situation."

While researching the topics around dropping in and out, an image surfaced that captured how I think you feel—exhausted, carrying too many hopes, people, tasks and responsibilities. At the side of the image, the artist Jo Spence had written: 'Do less & stay well, but neglect your work? Do too much, then fall ill & be looked after?'

Is there such a thing as Cinderella syndrome?

15 JULY 2025 - BACK INTO A GENDERED REALITY

Dear me, artist, woman,

In a system not built for you—or for us—I like to think there could be an us—it's all about who is allowed in, and who must be kept out. 'Keep out the killjoys!' they say—to the ones who might disrupt the secret hierarchies of the art world. Those who don't 'function' as expected within the white-cube mindset include people without starting capital, in caregiving roles, with illnesses, or, more importantly, with an artistic production that doesn't translate into productivity or economic gain. What about those struck by personal catastrophes, from which one can hardly recover? The list is, of course, longer, and this information is, of course, nothing new.

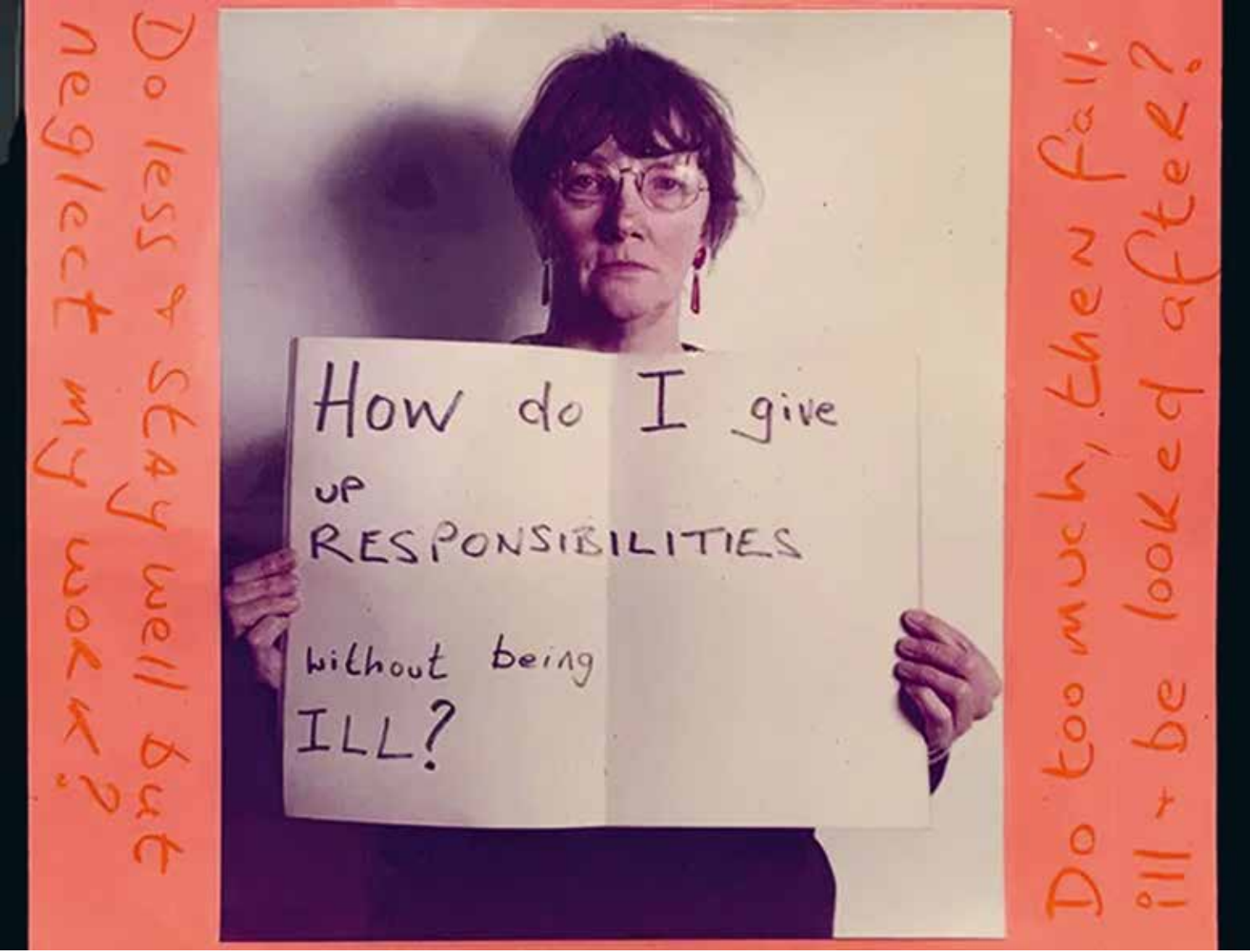
Already in the 1970s and '80s, Pierre Bourdieu identified multiple forms of capital beyond the economic—explaining why the same people continue to succeed easily. Each represents a resource that can be accumulated, exchanged, or converted into power: cultural, social, symbolic, educational (or academic), linguistic, political, emotional, bodily (or physical), and temporal capital.

Artistic practice and academia pretend to reward merit but in reality reward configurations of capital. Those with economic and temporal capital can take risks; those with cultural and linguistic capital are legible. The ones who can build social and symbolic capital circulate faster. Those blessed with emotional capital sustain institutions, organisations, and collectives — often invisibly.

Feminist thinkers such as Bell Hooks, Silvia Federici, and Sara Ahmed ask who keeps the system running. Postcolonial thinkers—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Achille Mbembe — ask who pays the historical and ongoing price.

So, it's not only Who has capital? but also: Who is exhausted? Who is translated?

Mathilde ter Heijne
Jo Spence
Audre Lorde
Margarethe Elisabeth Milow
Hannah Wilke
Hollis Sigler
Alina Szapocznikow,
Charlotte Lewis
Sandra Bartky



Only When I Got to Fifty Did I Realise I was Cinderella,
Jo Spence in collaboration with Rosy Martin
All images by Jo Spence © The Jo Spence Memorial Archive,
Ryerson Image Centre, Toronto, Canada

Who is excluded even when present? Who cares or carries work in the institution or organisation without recognition?

I created a diagram of my artistic career trajectory that makes visible the different forms of capital I have built up over time and how they have shifted over the years.

Admitting the effects of carrying invisible labour—the very thing that made me feel exhausted—is the hardest for me. As if other women artists hadn't warned me already—those who made different choices, or were forced to. I remember a friend without children once saying, at an exclusive artists' and curators' party, 'You cannot make good art if you have a child.' That hurt. I left, wondering if she could still be my friend.

Why would I expect to have it all? Solidarity seems reserved for the idealistic—you cannot calculate with it.

At times, I felt left out, sometimes even stigmatised as a mother—carrying, on top of that, the burden of loving and caring for a young person who does not fit neatly into societal norms. The artist in me started to dislike art as a saleable commodity, thinking it should be a force integrated into the social and political fabric, a clarifying, nourishing, and transformative power.

By the way, there are other gendered things for 'us'—beyond menstruation, having children, biased AI, and the low self-esteem so many of us still quietly carry.

I know very well now that there are.

16 AUGUST 2025 - PICTURE OF HEALTH

Dear me, artist, woman, body,

As I read about Jo Spence, I can't help but feel her illness reading me back.

JO SPENCE (1934–1992) understood photography as a way of making sense of the world—and of herself within it. From the early 1970s, she collaborated closely with others, co-founding Photography Workshop Ltd with Terry Dennett and later joining collectives such as the Hackney Flashers and Polysnappers. For Spence, taking a photograph was always a shared act—both political and personal, bound to everyday life.

When she was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1982, her work turned inward. She began photographing her body, her treatment, her fears—transforming the act of photographing into therapy, critique, and defiance. In works such as *The Picture of Health?* (1982–86), Spence rejected the passivity of the patient, reclaiming visibility on her own terms. Her images remain profoundly human: part self-portrait, part protest, part process of staying alive.

For *Dropping In and Out*, I will look at other artists diagnosed with breast cancer—how they dealt with that kind of 'drop out'. Some disappeared from visibility—from exhibitions, from the market—while others dropped out of life entirely, only to be 'rediscovered' after their deaths.

15 SEPTEMBER 2025 - AFTER SURGERY

My dearest me, artist, woman, body, reader,

I am in limbo.

Did I drop out—or did I fall out? I feel lost. Can I find my way back into life?



Jo Spence, *The Final Project*, 1991–92.
 © The Estate of Jo Spence.
 Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London.

What does this making—this production of images—still mean to me?
 What does it mean to us, as humans?

That's how far I've drifted: I no longer know if images still matter in strange times like these. Does artistic production still matter?

I heard a song in my head and recorded myself singing it. Maybe it was my personal ikaro—my own small healing chant. It wasn't art. It was survival.

How do I integrate this crisis into my life?

AUDRE LORDE (1934-1992) writes in her introduction to *The Cancer Journals* (1980) about 'women who have survived cancer by scrutinizing its meaning within their lives, and by attempting to integrate that crisis into useful strengths for change.'

And she kept writing. She kept producing.

30 SEPTEMBER 2025 - AFTER LIFE

Dear me, artist, woman, body, reader, friend,

The mother of my friend Patricia died of breast cancer after a long struggle—during which she tried to communicate with her cancer cells. I like the idea of another strong life form that secretly controls 'us', humans, although I think that artificial intelligence should not do that as it doesn't know life. Making the human species maybe more humble. Her mother kept a diary for her family, though my friend hasn't yet dared to read it.

Patricia also told me about MARGARETHE ELISABETH MILOW (1748-1794), who, between 1778 and 1794, wrote an autobiography for her husband and children — first published only in 1987. In it, she recounts her life as a "housewife" in Hamburg, marked by unhappy love, hope and happiness, marital worries, faith and fears. She is one of the few non-aristocratic women of the 18th century whose life was documented in such detail. *Ich will aber nicht murren. Mein Leben: Die Lebenserinnerungen der Kaufmannstochter Margarethe Elisabeth Milow von ihr selbst geschrieben* (But I Do Not Wish to Complain. My Life: The Memoirs of the Merchant's Daughter Margarethe Elisabeth Milow, Written by Herself) became a rare and significant counter-archive to dominant historical narratives shaped by white, male, and elite perspectives. Married against her will to a Protestant preacher in Hamburg, she bore eleven children and was diagnosed with breast cancer at forty-three—a condition whose painful course she documented with startling candour. She described being treated by a charlatan, later undergoing surgery without anaesthesia, recovering briefly, and then developing metastases. She died one year after the operation.

What struck me most, as I searched for the passages she wrote about her cancer, was how her accounts of illness appear almost incidental—woven into the dense fabric of her daily obligations and affective labour as a mother, wife, friend, and daughter. From a feminist historiographical perspective, this marginalisation of bodily suffering exposes how women's endurance has been normalised and how care, reproductive labour, and illness remain structurally invisible.

Milow's writing offers rare insight into how women's lives were lived, narrated, and historically obscured at the intersection of gender, class, and corporeality. These same structures still shape us today—shaping even how one constructs a career, a CV, an autobiography. (I sometimes think I might ask a ghostwriter to handle mine.)

2 OCTOBER 2025 - PROTEIN TALK

Dear cancer cells,

I started a dialogue with you, but you haven't answered.

Can we communicate—please?

I suppose asking you kindly to leave won't be enough...
 Maybe I have to learn your language.

9 OCTOBER 2025 - ZYKLEN

Dear me, artist, woman, body, reader, friend, patient,
 I'm struck by how my (strong and confident) mind and my (broken) body do not align. With
 the biweekly, deliberate poisoning of myself, my thoughts blur while my body revolts on
 its own.

21 NOVEMBER 2025 - SPRECHEN ÜBER MISSEFOLG?

Dear me, artist, woman, body, reader, friend, patient, mum,

Hello... is that you? Did you grow into being a mother?
 You've learned how to care for others, I suppose—until care began to take up all the space
 in your life.

What is it that keeps us clinging to life?
 What is it that keeps us clinging to art?

Already as a child, I sensed a kind of magic in images—in colours and forms—an
 intuitive vibration within my body that not everyone seemed to feel. Maybe only I could
 read it, and not those around me.

It was something solid. Something real beyond reality, beyond everyday life. That
 made it powerful; it gave me power.

Since that first encounter, at five years old, this resonance with the magical-visual
 has never stopped. It led me to become a visual artist, and later to turn that calling
 into a profession.

There has always been a paradox in my relationship to art: between my professional
 career and my love for it. Visibility lifts you up; success threatens to inflate the ego.

Thinking about these two forces, I realise I oscillate between different states of
 being an artist: the young one who needs to express an inner life, and the older one who
 must maintain visibility to survive. A compulsion to produce art in order to function—art
 that must be representational, legible.

Visibility. It seems essential to survival as an artist. Visibility is capital. Some
 cannot live without it.

HANNAH WILKE (1940–1993) used her own body as subject throughout her career. In her
 final works, her husband documented her experiences of breast cancer—the medical apparatus,
 her hair loss, her fragility. She confronted beauty ideals head-on. She continued making
 art until the very end—because art was her life? Or because through art she could
 transform her trauma? Did she cling to her ego, her visibility? Was she a narcissist? An
 exhibitionist? Are artists, perhaps, addicted to visibility?

2 JANUARY 2026 - TUMOURS PERSONIFIED

Dear me, artist, woman, body, reader, friend, patient, mum, you,

How did they manage to make art while being ill—these artists who carried tumours in
 their breasts? How were they physically able? Did they create during treatment, or only
 afterwards, when the body began to recover?

I deeply admire those who continued to make art: HOLLIS SIGLER (1948–2001),

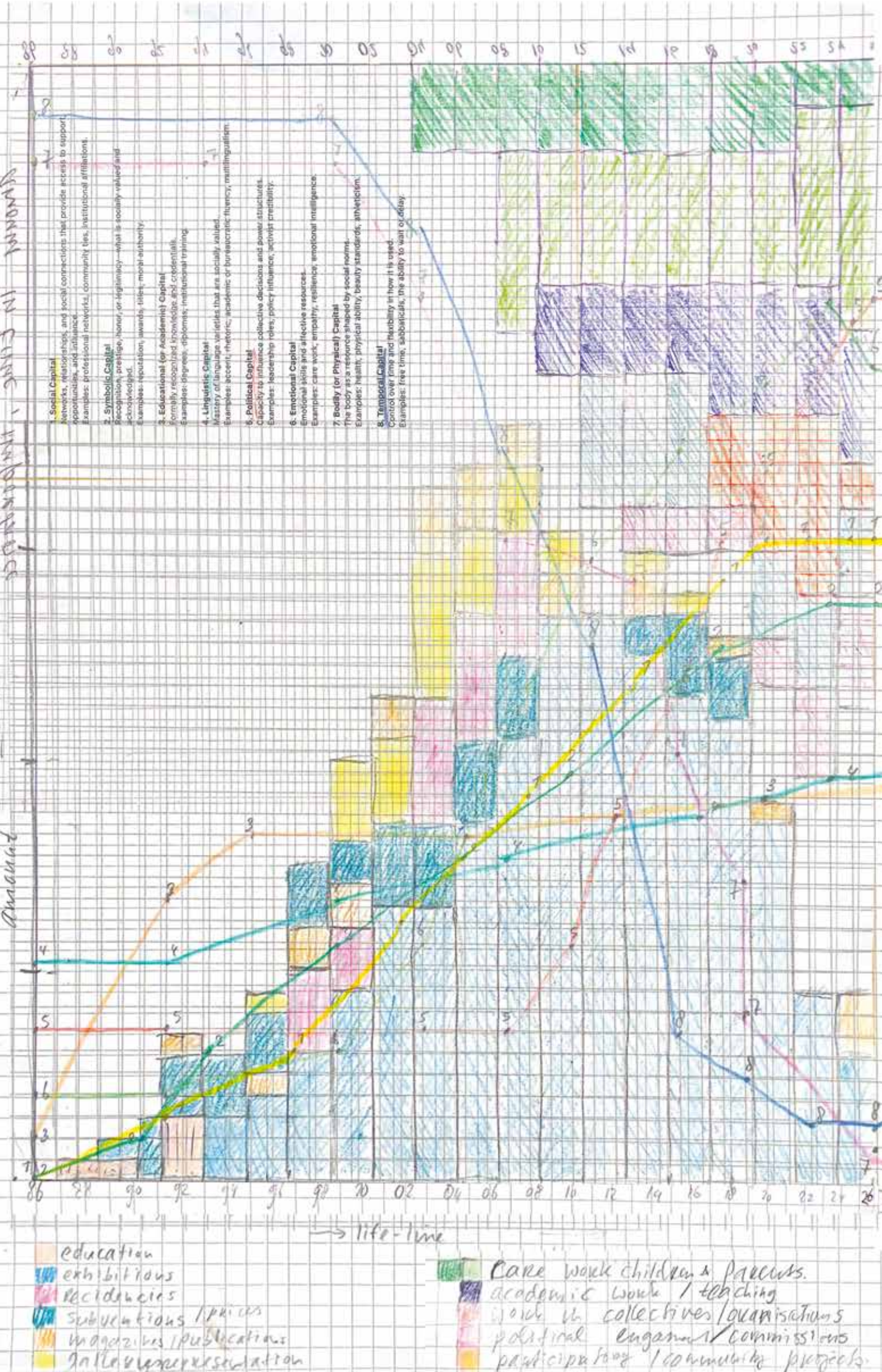
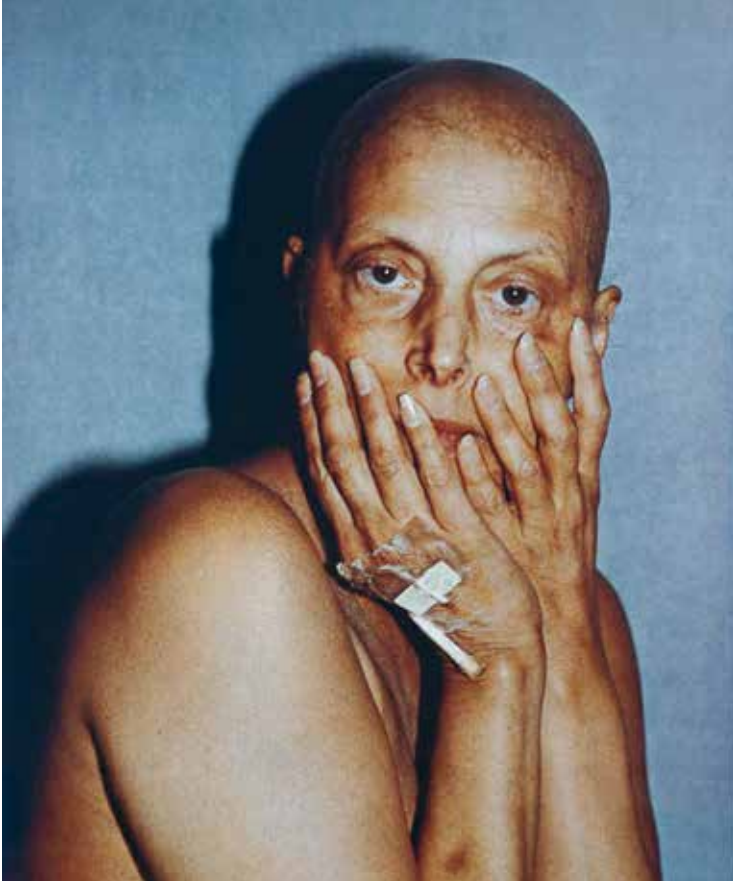


Diagram: My Priorities Shifted - Accumulation of Capital and Counter-Forces of an Artist's Career, 1988-2026 — © Mathilde ter Heijne



Hannah Wilke, July 26, 1992/February 19, 1992: #4 from *INTRA-VENUS*, 1992-93, 2 panels: 71 1/2 inches x 47 1/2 inches each, chromagenic supergloss prints.

who transformed her private experience of breast cancer into a visual advocacy for women's health and representation; and ALINA SZAPOCZNIKOW (1926-1973), who suffered from both breast and bone cancer. The title of her 1969 series *Tumours Personified* already reveals how directly her work drew from her illness. She used casts of her own body and translucent resin to give form to fragility and transformation. Her late sculptures merge sensuality and decay, turning cancer itself into a sculptural metaphor.

When I searched Latin American and African art histories for women who transformed breast cancer into form, I found almost nothing. Not because their bodies were spared, but because illness was not allowed to speak through art—or because the archive has remained silent.

I came across CHARLOTTE LEWIS (1934-1999), an African American artist who painted outdoor murals addressing racism and social injustice. Her work, rooted in community education and empowerment, rarely reached beyond north-east Portland. She too died of breast cancer. I keep thinking about her murals, open to the weather, slowly fading—public, visible, and still unseen.

14 JANUARY 2026 - THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE AND ART IN TIMES OF AI

Dear me, artist, woman, body, reader, friend, patient, mum, you, human,

For whom am I producing art, for whom can I create something meaningful?

When I go online—into the popular apps—I see an inflation of images, of visibility itself. A flood of biased visual material that feels increasingly dehumanised, unpolitical, and art is not exempt. Maybe it is the ease with which people generate images through AI: pictures made to shock, to please the eye, to reinforce the 'artist-brand', to sell, or to fill a hollow craving for visibility.

In the 1970s, feminist philosopher SANDRA BARTKY (1935-2016) coined the term 'feminine narcissism' in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (1990) to describe how she thought women are taught—overtly and covertly—to become so preoccupied with their appearance that self-alienation and shame take root. This

'inferiorisation', she wrote, is not innate but produced by societal pressures: a beauty-industrial complex that glorifies and depreciates the female body at once, compelling women to monitor and correct themselves perpetually.

'Knowing that she is to be subjected to the cold appraisal of the male connoisseur and that her life prospects may depend on how she is seen, a woman learns to appraise herself first ... The sexual objectification of women produces a duality in feminine consciousness. The gaze of the Other is internalised so that I myself become at once seer and seen, appraiser and the thing appraised.'

Bartky explains that a woman in this setting becomes a prisoner of the Panopticon. Because the gaze is everywhere at once, she learns to self-police her body for every perceived flaw—living in continuous self-objectification and estrangement from her physical being.

Most of Bartky's essays were written more than thirty-five years ago—long before the age of social media and, frankly, before the shit truly hit the fan.

Social media both rewards and punishes self-objectification. It cultivates an endless cycle of watching and being watched, flooding the user with images of her own body and of what she is not. Bartky died at eighty-one, never having seen how the internet would magnify the very dynamics she described.

Twenty years earlier, in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), Elisabeth Bronfen (still alive!) writes in her chapter '*The Lady Is a Portrait in ...*' that the artwork can be read as a displaced figure of the dead feminine body.

I think contemporary artwork can no longer be compared to a dead female-identified body, observed from a safe distance. Much of the (online) stuff feels more like a sick one—a sick body, as we sometimes see it, distorted and manipulated by AI programs, nasty prompts with the aim, again, of devaluing feminine strength, instrumentalised for visibility and profit, detached from the pulse of lived experience.

Isn't art meant to be the sharing of intimate, intense human experience—including failure, disappointment, ugliness, mess, shame, birth, generosity, solidarity, illness, death?

Maybe I am simply a human—me, woman, artist, body, reader, friend, patient, mum, you—still learning how to do art-making and life-making at the same time. Still insisting that visibility can hold tenderness. Still believing that meaning, like love, is created in the act of staying present and alive.

Marie-Jeanne Roland: Posterity Responds

Jessica Goodman to Marie-Jeanne Roland

Marie-Jeanne Philipon Roland was born in France in 1754 and died under the guillotine in 1793. She was not a published author in her lifetime; or rather, she was not the acknowledged author of anything we might view as a conventional literary text. She did, however, contribute behind the scenes to the political writings of her husband, a prominent figure in the Girondist faction during the Revolution, as well as writing hundreds of letters. Then, incarcerated in the Bastille in the run-up to her execution, she wrote a series of texts that were published posthumously under the title 'Appeal to Impartial Posterity'. In these texts, predominantly consisting of a memoir, she explicitly sets out to control the image of herself (and her husband) that will exist into the future: 'Roland [...] will not die to posterity [...] and I too will have some sort of existence for future generations' (p. 277).¹ It is with respect to her husband, too, that she uses the phrase that her first editor, her friend Louis Bosc, chose as the title for her writings, when he published them to make money for her orphaned daughter in 1795: 'his public conduct must necessarily prove to impartial posterity his [...] enlightenment and his virtues [...]: here is the truth' (p. 337, my emphasis).² But it is her own image that is at the centre of the memoirs: they end with her planned plea to her judges at her trial, a plea of which she was allowed to speak only a couple of sentences before being silenced, but which should have ended with the injunction: 'it is now up to you to judge [...]' (p. 374). She is therefore an author who tries to control and shape her capital as woman, writer, and political figure through her writings. What follows is a response from that posterity to which Mme Roland addressed these attempts: the readers and researchers of the twenty-first century.

Dear Manon,

Or should that be Marie-Jeanne Philipon, or Mme Roland, or even just Marie? In the thousands of pages that have been written about you since your death, you are a chameleonesque figure, and your name is just one aspect that refuses to be pinned down.

I should introduce myself. I am posterity, or at least one representative of it: that mysterious future force in which you placed so much hope when you wrote your Memoirs from your prison cell in that dark winter of 1793. When you wrote the final pages of that text, you knew that you did not have long to live; indeed, you wrote as if you were already in the grave: 'Had I been allowed to live, I would have ...' (p. 338). What you would have done, you said, was to write: more precisely, to write a history of your own time. For the individual who scrupulously hid her contributions to her husband's work, evoked 'my very reasonable desire to avoid putting myself on display in any manner' (p. 313), and once wrote 'I would rather bite my own fingers off than become an author' (p. 321), this is something of a departure. You were even explicit about the likely fate of a female author: 'men don't like her and her own sex criticises her: if her works are bad, she is mocked, and if they are good, it is claimed that they do not belong to her' (p. 304). And yet your hopeless, unrealisable ambition of authorship, discovered at the moment of death, seems to represent the shift that took place when you were imprisoned: suddenly, the public, and specifically the future public, became absolutely vital; their good opinion of you the only means to counteract the image that your trial and execution would create.³

Your Memoirs paint a picture of a woman who was a devoted wife and mother, but who was also engaged in the thought and politics of her time from a young age. There are clear moments of self-mythologisation: writing about your childhood, you pinpoint the moment that was the 'origin of your taste for writing' (p. 233), and examine how your readings influenced your politics. You do not shy away from

¹ All references to the Appel are taken from *Mémoires de Madame Roland*, ed. by Paul Roux (Paris: Mercure de France, 1966). All translations are mine.

² See Siân Reynolds, *Marriage and Revolution: Monsieur and Madame Roland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 289.

³ For a nuanced examination of your 'graphomania' as your death approached, see Joanna Stalnaker, *The Rest is Silence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2026), pp. 205-21.

4 On the fragmentary nature of what was left behind, see Béatrice Didier, 'Madame Roland: History, Memoirs, and Autobiography', in Colette H. Winn and Donna Kuizenga (eds), *Women Writers in Pre-Revolutionary France: Strategies of Emancipation* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), pp. 363–72.

5 Carl Becker, 'The Memoirs and the Letters of Madame Roland', *The American Historical Review*, 33.4 (1928), 784–803, notes that your writings—albeit recounting an important period of political turmoil—were less concerned with events than with your own responses to them.

6 See Jessica Goodman, 'Introduction: What, Where, Who Is Posterity?', in Joseph Harris and Jessica Goodman (eds), *Anticipated Afterlives: Envisaging Posterity in Early Modern France, Early Modern French Studies*, 40.1 (2018), pp. 2–10.

7 Pierre Tissot, *Histoire complète de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Silvestre, 1834), vol. xx, pp. xx–xx; repeated by (among others) Alphonse de Lamartine, *Histoire des Girondins* (Paris: H. Bechhold, 1847), VII, pp. 226–48.



Madame Roland writing to her daughter in the Conciergerie prison before her execution, 1793. Illustration from *My Magazine - the Monthly Companion of The Children's Newspaper*, 1923. Credit: Look and Learn

8 Lesley H. Walker, 'Sweet and Consoling Virtue: The Memoirs of Madame Roland', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34.2 (2001), 403–19.

9 *Réimpression de l'ancien Moniteur, seule histoire authentique et inaltérée de la Révolution française depuis la réunion des États-généraux jusqu'au Consulat (mai 1789–novembre 1799)* (Paris: Plon, 1860), XVIII, p. 450. Sainte-Beuve and Stendhal are among the famous names to have taken this approach to Roland's life.

difficult experiences: you describe in detail a sexual assault as a child, and contemplate your complicated relationship to religion at a number of junctures. But the process of recalling your life also seems to be a pleasurable one: 'what better is there to do in prison than to transport one's existence elsewhere through a happy fiction, or through interesting memories?' (pp. 201–2). And it is a reasoned one, too: when time is running out, you make notes for what would come next, 'to act as a final supplement to the Memoirs' (p. 329). You seem, then, to be seeking a sort of capital that is reputational, but largely with respect to your personal qualities rather than any artistic abilities; and yet it is your skill as a writer that allows you to shape this image.

What is not wholly clear is what you hoped would happen to the pile of notebooks in which you recorded your recollections of your life, as well as your reflections on the political events that surrounded you.⁴ It was not your choice to publish, nor to call your Memoirs an 'Appeal to Impartial Posterity'. And yet you had used that phrase, and your text very explicitly orientates itself towards the future: an address to an unknown audience, just as much as your testamentary final letter addresses your daughter and her protectors, and your planned plea speech addresses the jury and judges at your trial. You note how hard it was for others to paint you—'no [portrait] has ever given a true idea of my person, for it is difficult to capture' (p. 255)—and you also suggest that your story might interest 'unfortunate captives' or 'philosophers, examining the human heart in a novel' (p. 237). You clearly had a sense of future readers, and of a desire to tell your own story to them, even if there was no obvious plan for how that story would reach them.⁵

So what can I, standing in for the posterity of which you held such high hopes, tell you about the success of your enterprise? What capital does the name Madame Roland hold in the twenty-first century, 230 years after your death?

In spite of the epithet of impartiality with which you endowed posterity, in fact any account of an individual given by others is necessarily partial, in both senses of the term.⁶ Bosc's publication of your writings, with an epigraph drawn from your letters—'Let my last letter to my daughter fix her attention on what appears to be her essential duty, and let the memory of her mother attach her forever to virtue which consoles us for all things'—emphasised your virtue as a model for your daughter. This choice helped to draw attention to this aspect of your character from the very start: the model mother and, in corollary, the model wife, effaced behind her husband's political career. And your personal account did not stand alone: others were adding their own shading to the portrait of you that remained, as it was reproduced in nine different editions from 1795–1885. In particular, a description of your execution by the historian Pierre Tissot told of your stoic calm in the face of the guillotine, offering a trembling Lamarche the chance to die first so as not to witness your demise: this anecdote has been repeated in biographies ever since.⁷ In the early nineteenth century, this image of feminine virtue was cemented by those who republished and wrote about your text: Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Goethe, Lamartine, Michelet, and Carlyle all admired you.⁸ Yet at the same time, a series of other writers painted a completely opposing picture: rather than the perfect woman, you

were the anti-woman, forgetting yourself in your political fervour. This version of your life began in the *Moniteur universel* account printed just a week after your death, which accused you—alongside Marie-Antoinette and Olympe de Gouges—of having 'forgotten the virtues of your sex', and thus condemning yourself to the scaffold.⁹

This polarisation continued into the twentieth century: a particularly bizarre biography in English from the 1930s is entitled *Madame Roland; or, The Mirror of Men's Dreams*, and goes so far in its focus on your femininity (here more sexualised) as to include chapters with titles such as 'Flies round the Honey-Pot'.¹⁰ Another biographer—this time a woman, writing in the early 2000s—sets out to save you from the words of others, 'to re-establish a more equitable image

of (your) rich and complex personality', but her project involves writing in the first person, appropriating your name and voice.¹¹ Writing a 'counter history of the French Revolution' via the biographies of women, Michael Onfray's 2016 book chooses a curious present-tense style to focus predominantly on your philosophical beliefs,¹² whilst Pierre Cornut-Gentille's monograph considers your status as a writer and your potential for agency, but ultimately simply repeats the same anecdotes as everyone else, arguing that by the time of your death you were content and 'reconciled with yourself'.¹³

It is a chapter by Mona Ozouf that has most helpfully tried to make sense of the different versions of Madame Roland that exist today.¹⁴ Her claim is that your correspondence—which was also published in several editions from the early nineteenth century—gave one impression of you, and your memoirs another: one spontaneous and oriented towards each specific recipient, the other more controlled and sustained, with a single recipient (posterity) as the envisaged reader. She insists, though, that there is nonetheless a coherence to your life and self, which only comes into focus when we take into account the external context within which different pieces of writing were produced; the involuntary shifts in your trajectory that have subsequently been read as intention. Indeed, you explicitly refer, in a letter of 4 July 1793, to 'this profession of faith that I would never have dreamed of making public if an abuse of authority were not accusing me in the most public fashion':¹⁵ you are forced, here, to shift from a logic of virtue and modesty (personal or emotional capital, perhaps) to a more public and explicitly political logic, where the capital you seek derives from an audience hearing your voice. Cornevin, too, provides a helpful analysis of the trace of external events on your writing, which explains its twists and turns: you began your 'notice historique' on events since your return to Paris just seven days after your imprisonment on 1 June. In August, you began your *Mémoires particulières*, shifting the focus to your own past in that attempt to displace yourself I quoted above. A month later, though, you heard of a new law that meant you were likely to be condemned within weeks: it was at this point that you shifted gears to write the notes for what you WOULD have written about the rest of your life.¹⁶ So even within the text, your focus is continually shifting according to the external forces to which you respond. This is all assumption, of course, but it does fit the text; and in the absence of your confirmation, assumption is the best we have.

But that, I suppose, is the point; that is the problem with any attempt to control your image in posterity. You wrote your *Appel* as you may have written a letter. But a letter is already notorious for its capacity to be misinterpreted: decades of research on the epistolary genre have underlined the instability introduced by the gap—geographical and temporal—between writer and recipient.¹⁷ And where a letter to the living can at least be answered, misinterpretations later corrected, ambiguities clarified, a letter to posterity (just like any form of artwork whose creator is no more) affords no such benefits. Instead, all that it can produce is further writings, to be sent forward into the even more distant future; writings which themselves can be read, interpreted, and responded to—rightly or wrongly—by more and more distant audiences, who read in contexts that are further and further removed from the one in which the original letter was produced.

And if I began by saying I am part of that posterity, then I too am implicated in this chain of reinterpretation. Mine might be a self-conscious one, which draws attention to its own partiality, but it nonetheless contributes to the body of writings and responses that surround your words, that have surrounded them from the start, and which mean that no future reading of your *Appel* can ever be impartial. When we, as researchers, decide to excavate or simply to reread a life, an oeuvre, we inevitably alter it in some way—a sort of literary observers' paradox. And in the funding-driven academic world that encourages the identification of relevance and impact, we increasingly (and sometimes, I think, disingenuously) ascribe to the authors of the past forms of meaning and capital that they could never have imagined; reframing or even inverting the importance of their own droppings in and out to suit our twenty-first-century needs. Even if our aims are worthy ones—to correct the oversights of previous generations; to expand the canon—in doing so, we write our own new versions of the individuals of the past: to write 'X hoped to be remembered, but she was not' is in itself a

10 M. P. Willcocks, *Madame Roland; or, The Mirror of Men's Dreams* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1936).

11 Marianne Cornevin, *Liberté, que de crimes on commet en ton nom! Vie de Madame Roland, guillotinée le 8 novembre 1793* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2002).

12 Michael Onfray, *La Force du Sexe Faible: Contre-Histoire de la Révolution Française* (Paris: Éditions Autrement, 2016), pp. 75–102.

13 Pierre Cornut-Gentille, *Madame Roland: Une femme en politique sous la Révolution* (Paris: Perrin, 2004), p. 16.

14 Mona Ozouf, 'Madame Roland: Manon ou la vaillance', in *Les Mots des femmes: Essai sur la singularité française* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), pp. 85–110.

15 *Lettres de Madame Roland*, ed. by Claude Perroud, 2 vols (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1900–02), II, p. 497.

16 Cornevin, p. 15.

17 For a seminal early example, see Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1982).

18 For more on the value of hope

in imagining future reputation, even when posterity is recognised as uncertain, see Jessica Goodman, 'The View from Upstream: Authority and Projection in Fontenelle's *Nouveaux dialogues des morts*', in Daniel Jernigan, Neil Murphy, and Michelle Wang (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Death and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2021), pp. 83-90.

paradoxical claim, for it apophastically memorialises that which it claims has been forgotten.

To return to questions (and clichés) of economic capital: in the financial world, one must speculate to accumulate, but one is always equally warned that the value of investments can go up as well as down. Such is the case for the capital of reputation, left as it is in the hands of the (un?)scrupulous Other. And yet, and yet ... For the modern academic, who cannot avoid their own readings altering their object, perhaps all we can do is acknowledge our own interventions, either being as clear as possible (unlike some of your biographers) in distinguishing between our own voice and that of our source, or avowing the transformational capacities of what we undertake; tracking the changes that we enact through our interventions; even entering into what is today called 'creative criticism'. And for the writing subject of that academic discourse, the concept of posterity can still retain its value, even in the face of so much uncertainty: after all, for you, the idea of 'impartial posterity' provided hope, in your darkest moment, that one day you might be remembered and judged as you so dearly wished to be—and that is, perhaps, capital enough.¹⁸

With best wishes,
Jessica Goodman
On behalf of posterity.

wait wait wait Dora

Oreet Ashery on Dora Benjamin

Dear Dora,

While your brother Walter Benjamin is one of the most prominent Western thinkers, philosophers, and media critics of the twentieth century, I have not been able to gather much information or analysis about you so far. This is mainly due to a lack of funding and access. I tried. I would need support from German-speaking researchers, permissions to visit archives and public records in Germany, and funding for translations. Still—or perhaps because of this—I have been speaking to you in my head for several years. This text is open to multiple readings: a fan letter, an exhibition review, or a soft way of publicly disseminating my thoughts about you.

The context of this publication concerns women, including those socialised as women, self-identified women, genderfluid and trans people, who drop in and out of present systems, history, and capital. It is valuable to consider how this dropping in and out may manifest in our one-sided relationship. Here I am, writing to you, about you—alas, without your consent. And perhaps it is not consent that is desired, but an impossible dialogue.

I have been intrigued by the exhibition you initiated at the Gesundheitshaus (en: Health House) in Kreuzberg, Berlin, in 1929, titled 'Healthy Nerves', and by the potential this exhibition might hold today if it were to be restaged or responded to. It is something I would like to do in the future, collaboratively, with the living, the sick, the displaced, the precarious, and the dead. Such a prospect would provide an opportunity to evaluate and expand upon the exhibition from a contemporary decolonial perspective.

I wonder whether you imagined any part of your future when you installed the show: that only a few years later you would flee your established life in Berlin for Paris, and that from then on you would live as a sick, intellectual, socialist Jewish refugee, moving illegally from one place to another with the support of friends across Western Europe. I think about how your resilience and survival skills were perhaps both energised and drained by the continuous psychological support you provided to children in temporary safe spaces. I am reminded of you on occasions when I meet Ali Alzein from Bees & Refugees, and of how the bee farm he created with others in Kent provides a sanctuary and a community for local and more distant children, adults, and refugees who visit.

'Healthy Nerves', as I understand it, was an exhibition addressing the effects of urban stress and un/employment on mental health through engaged, participatory means. Your sustained investment in the psychological wellbeing of working-class women and children likely informed the project, perhaps as an artistic method of creating awareness around these issues. Some aspects of the exhibition that draw me in are the large-scale displays, the presentation of relevant information and data, and the educational, participatory approach to public engagement. These curatorial strategies have since found their way into aspects of socially engaged art practices as we know them today.

I am particularly intrigued by the 2.5-metre-tall cube exhibit, which bore a photomontage with the slogan, Give working people money, light, air, and space!, alongside another photomontage depicting people and machines. A diorama with the slogan, Work, poverty, stimulation use up the strength of your nerves, depicted the homes of the poor, a factory, and affluent entertainment venues side by side. It is reminiscent of a fictional socialist theatrical production or an imagined municipal museum display in a small town.

Both the cube and the diorama may have appeared startling as appropriations of artworks from other spheres brought into an exhibition context. My favourite piece is a folio sheet printed in ten columns with the word WAIT—waiting at the employment office? Waiting for a job? For money? For help? For life to change for the better? Waiting is a continuous state of dropping in and out of the things that separate one wait from the next. The WAIT print bore the slogan The Poor Man's Pricelist and was placed beneath furniture brought from an employment office.

I have not managed to obtain further information on the print, such as its materials, font, or size, but from what I can gather—or imagine—the piece appears to pre-empt

concrete poetry, at least formally, inviting the viewer to experience the gravity and weight of waiting as something bodily felt in the encounter with the sheet on the floor.

You might be interested to hear that 'Healthy Nerves' also prefigured the late-1990s theory of relational aesthetics, a term coined by the French curator Nicolas Bourriaud, who suggested that artists could be understood as facilitators and providers of information. In this sense, the artist becomes an instigator of change, bringing exhibits or situations from 'real life', or from social relations, into the gallery. This act of displacement reveals power relations through the sheer presence of objects, materials, relations, or situations taken out of their original contexts.

After I 'dropped out' of Jerusalem, my birthplace, and emigrated to the UK, I 'dropped back in' with an exhibition at the Artists' House, where I transported my old bedroom from my parents' home into the gallery. During the opening, my mother continuously apologised to visitors and explained how, in England, this is considered art. It was enraging, endearing, and funny for many reasons. Resituating the furniture from my former life marked what would become both a symbolic and an actual departure—one without an eventual return.

Giulia Smith wrote in *Art Monthly* (2018) about artists who operate as radical health activists and who pose urgent questions about what healing—public or private—might mean both inside and outside the neoliberal art world. She refers, among others, to Simone Leigh, who created the socially engaged work *Waiting Room* (2018) at the New Museum in New York. The project honoured the tragic fate of Esmin Elizabeth Green, a Jamaican woman who died unnoticed in the psychiatric emergency room of a New York hospital after waiting more than twenty-four hours for medical attention.

The word waiting in Leigh's work bears a direct relation to the WAIT print in *Healthy Nerves*. Both speak to precarity and its close relationship to waiting—a condition that is often violent, deadly, or traumatic. For me, this resonance is deeply personal. It echoes transgenerational trauma experienced by sick or disabled women in my extended family, some of whom died waiting, as a result of medical or patriarchal neglect, in horrific ways.

Your sibling Walter wrote, in his exhibition review *Bekränzter Eingang* (The Garlanded Entrance) for *Die Literarische Welt* in January 1930, about what has since become a dominant concern of our present moment: attention and distraction. He appears to have been inspired by the exhibition, and particularly by the contribution of the addiction specialist and physician Ernst Joel, who engaged in self-experimentation with drugs.

Walter noted how the exhibition encouraged a mode of engagement akin to shock, generated through the joyful presence of everyday hanging objects—such as garlands—and through the compulsion to move through the space and interact with the exhibits. Of particular interest was a box in which visitors could leave feedback that would feed directly into potential changes to the exhibition itself. He observed that these modes of engagement mirrored the conditions of modern urban life and produced a form of distraction that disrupted the sustained attention associated with traditional contemplative viewing.

In his later writings, Walter developed this line of thought further, arguing that distraction can function as a productive and even necessary mode of attention, however counterintuitive this might initially appear.

In my exhibition with Jo Spence at the Wellcome Collection in 2019, 'Misbehaving Bodies', I provided boxes in which visitors could respond anonymously to the question: 'Do you consider yourself healthy?' As the piles of anonymous responses grew, it became clear that systemic living conditions often define painful and life-limiting illnesses, and that mental health—or the capacity to live with and manage physical sickness—was what mattered most to people, and what they most wanted to share their experiences about.

From what I have learned through reading about the holistic health centre you helped run with your sibling, the physician George Benjamin, I sense that you advocated an approach in which physical and emotional wellbeing are understood as deeply intertwined, and always situated within the material conditions of people's lives.

The ways you have drifted in and out of my thoughts remind me of how attention and distraction complement one another. I need to step aside, eat a snack, take a nap, or scroll on my phone before I can return to what I have been focusing on. I love imagining bees resting in small groups, sometimes clinging to one another's legs for stability and safety, helping each other to avoid slipping off petals while conserving energy and warmth. Even in rest, we need one another.

That you are gradually becoming more acknowledged, and that details of your life are becoming more accessible through the work of other thinkers, reassures me that the passing and sharing of ancestral knowledge between generations is dynamic, not fixed or linear. You drifted between numerous exilic homes, sicknesses, and lived experiences of war, supporting others as you yourself were supported by peers, acquaintances, and friends. This speaks to models of survival grounded in interdependence and mutual care.

Sickness and healing enter and exit the art world as recurring themes, yet they rarely alter the material conditions of care for cultural workers, who are often able to mobilise only through exhausting collective efforts. For those who are precarious or ill, being periodically embraced, only to be subsequently excluded from both the health system and the art system, remains all too common.

A practising artist for decades and a tenured academic, I find myself burnt out in a world set ablaze by its patriarchs and leaders. To choose to periodically stop, rest, sleep, resist, become obscure or silent, withdraw, hide, or refuse is to opt for fugitive practices—practices that afford greater autonomy and support the wellbeing of our nervous systems in the face of high-speed, destructive capitalism, which has accelerated drastically since the time of the Healthy Nerves exhibition in 1929.

I would like to thank the curator Suza Husse for first introducing me to Dora Benjamin on a snowy night at the agricultural school with the WLINTA farming collective LAWINE in Neuendorf im Sande, Germany, and Flo Ray for her wise advice on this piece. I am also grateful for *Presence of Mind: Walter Benjamin* by Carolin Duttlinger (2022) and *Dora Benjamin: Stages of a Displaced Scientist* (1901-1946) by Eva Schöck-Quinteros (2017).

Visibility and Value in Writing Forgotten Lives: Elena Quiroga's 'Plácida, la joven' (1956)

Hannie Lawlor on Elena Quiroga

Elena Quiroga (1921–95) was a pioneering Spanish writer whose life and legacy draw into sharp relief the capital of visibility that shapes our reception and remembering of an artistic career. Quiroga spent a significant part of her adult life under the repressive Francoist regime, which took power when she was eighteen, following the Nationalist victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), and endured until Franco's death in 1975. The regime's attempted relegation of women to the private sphere contributed in no small part, as Patricia O'Byrne observes, to the surge of women writers who emerged in the wake of the Civil War, on a scale unmatched in post-war Europe.¹ These women—Quiroga amongst them—were widely read and translated, and many of their works were met with critical acclaim and awarded literary prizes. Their legacies, however, have been short-lived: as O'Byrne summarises, 'success and acclaim notwithstanding, the majority of [these] women novelists have yet to find a place in the literary canon'.² In Quiroga's case, the relationship between prominence and obscurity, attention and neglect, is not merely a posthumous phenomenon. At the ostensible peak of her prestige in the Spanish literary landscape, when she was appointed in 1983 to the Real Academia Española—only the second woman to have been thus recognised—she was dubbed *la olvidada* (the forgotten one) in a newspaper article greeting the announcement, following years of her being overlooked by critics.³ Phyllis Zatlin emphasises that remaining out of sight was a conscious choice on the part of the writer:

[Quiroga] relished the privacy of her family life. Shunning publicity, she became known as the writer least seen in public and least likely to be the subject of interviews. For this reason few references to her life appear in critical writings about her works, and what little information is given is often erroneous, possibly based on speculation.⁴

Quiroga's own 'dropping out', so to speak, reminds us of the level of exposure and (self-) publicity on which the capital of visibility rests and, crucially, that accumulating it is not necessarily the writer's own aim. Indeed, the importance Quiroga afforded to privacy and intimacy not only translated into the content of her work, with its focus on the everyday lives of often alienated or marginalised individuals, but also shaped its form: her preference for interior monologue contrasted sharply with the social-realist mode that dominated Spanish literature of the 1950s. Quiroga demonstrated a keen interest in giving voice to the inner lives of characters otherwise devoid of a platform from which to speak, which upsets any straightforward relationship between (in)visibility and silence, erasure, and forgetting.

To the writer of a forgotten life,

I write to you at a time when the parameters of our field have long been pushed open, our sights set far wider than the lives of 'great men' that delimited the work of the first wave of autobiography scholars.⁵ From feminist, queer, postcolonial studies and beyond, many of us have taken as a scholarly commitment—an ethical imperative—to correct the historical overlooking of other lives; lives, that is, lacking in the socio-cultural capital that long dictated who makes a worthy autobiographical subject. For early theorists, such worthy subjects were prominent public figures, with access to the platform reserved for the few.⁶ The position that you adopt—that we adopt—by contrast, of recoverer, reclamer, reteller; the role we assume as writers who strive to 'rescue' life stories from obscurity and oblivion, could hardly differ more in intent. But with some unpicking, our aims edge discomfitingly close to the socio-cultural capital that shaped mid-twentieth-century autobiography scholarship. Even as we shift from a focus on visible lives to making lives visible, that is, we remain

¹ Patricia O'Byrne, *Post-War Spanish Women Novelists and the Recuperation of Historical Memory* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2014), p. 25.

² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³ Phyllis Zatlin, 'Writing Against the Current: The Novels of Elena Quiroga', in Joan L. Brown (ed.), *Women Writers of Contemporary Spain: Exiles in the Homeland* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1991), pp. 42–58 (p. 42).

⁴ Phyllis Zatlin, *Elena Quiroga* (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 18.

⁵ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography Now: An Updated Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 3rd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024), pp. 193–95.

⁶ *Recovering History through Fact and Fiction: Forgotten Lives*, ed. by Dallas John Baker, Donna Lee Brien, and Nike Sulway (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), p. 2.

7 Elena Quiroga, *Plácida, la joven: y otras narraciones*, 2nd edn (Barcelona: Editorial Noguer, 1970). Page numbers are given in the main body of the text.

8 Marlene Kadar distinguishes 'ordinary' from 'literary' women and men who write their lives: 'Coming to Terms: Life Writing—from Genre to Critical Practice', in *Essays on Life Writing*, ed. by Marlene Kadar (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), pp. 3–16 (pp. 5–6). *Plácida, la joven* combines the focus on an 'ordinary' life with its writing by an ambiguously positioned but, we assume, 'literary' narrator, whose lack of distinguishing features invites readers to merge her with Quiroga.

shackled to the same pairing of visibility and value. Our ambition is a recovery that is as complete as possible, a reversal of the silences and lacunae that have resulted in these lives dropping out of social and academic sight. But is there also room, in our commendable enterprise, to question this bind between value and visibility? In writing forgotten lives, is our only impulse one of exposure, or do the inconspicuous, the unremarkable, the imperceptible have a role to play? Methodologically, we are geared to minimise the moments that the market—one that, in the twenty-first century, pivots on the desire for maximum exposure—might deem unworthy of reading. And yet, writing fictional lives labours under no such logic. There are countless iterations of an unabashed focus on ever-ordinary protagonists: we need only think of Flaubert's *Un cœur simple* (1877) and Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909). Might writing fictional lives thus offer insight into a methodology that moves beyond the capital of visibility? Could an alternative schema emerge from this literary space, in other words, that puts questions to those that persist in shaping 'real' lives and their writing?

While scholars of autobiography have given surprisingly little space to date to such questions, they and their significance are nowhere clearer than in the work of twentieth-century Spanish writer Elena Quiroga, herself a near-forgotten voice in spite of her pioneering contributions to the literary landscape. Her 1956 short story, 'Plácida, la joven' (The Young Plácida),⁷ was her second work in quick succession with a deceased character at its centre; the first, 'Algo pasa en la calle' (Something Is Happening in the Street) (1954), shines a light on the legacy of the academic Ventura as it is constructed through the eyes of others and the multiple, clashing, and highly subjective versions of his life

and death. Quiroga channels this focus on voicelessness and vulnerability in 'Plácida, la joven' into a set of ethical questions as to how we remember and record the lives of others, interrogating the value, limitations, and responsibilities that appear in the process. Through its intersections between real and fictional acts of life writing and forgotten lives, this short story offers insight into our own enterprise. It is framed as an attempt to remedy the very kind of collective failure with which we grapple—the failure to acknowledge the life, to prevent the death, to preserve the memory—in the context of an 'ordinary' life,⁸ that of the eponymous Plácida, a young woman who died in childbirth during the narrator's visit to a coastal village in rural Galicia. The story takes the form of a letter fragment, with neither address nor date, in which the narrator strives to bring to light Plácida's otherwise invisible life and its untimely loss. Her focus is not so much on the tragedy of the loss in the letter as it is on the tragedy of the forgetting, triggered by her own response to the news of the death: 'Morreu Plácida [...]—¿Quién?—pregunté' (Plácida is dead [...] "Who?", I asked) (p. 24). Front and centre of this story, Quiroga makes plain, are the personal projections and drive of our fellow life writer. The narrator's guilt at not having remembered and never having interacted with this young woman drives the desire to atone by 'rescuing' her, bestowing on Plácida attention in death that she was not given, and did not seek, in life.



Elena Quiroga (1921–1995) Writer of the twentieth century, drawing by Hakima El Kaddouri

We confront in this short story, as life writers, tensions to which we are liable otherwise to turn a blind eye: tensions between visibility and (self-) effacement, between intimacy and exposure, and between our own desires, those of our readers, and those of our subjects. The narrator's drive clashes with the response to Plácida's death of those who knew her—their resuming of work and excitement about the harvest the day after the funeral—and, most painfully, with the speculative suppression of her memory by her husband, who was working overseas when she died. We might anticipate, accordingly, a singular spotlight on the eponymous Plácida, a recovery of her otherwise invisible life and death story, a

kind of post-mortem reversal in writing of her 'dropping out'. Yet everything about this text, from its title to its form, resists this individual re-inscription. Plácida's name is qualified, of course, by 'la joven' [the young woman], an epithet that establishes her identity in relation, but the name itself also denotes this other-oriented identity. Its root, the Latin placere, 'to please', mirrors the young woman's working and living for those around her in a way that evades, consciously or otherwise, markers of individuality and the attention they might draw. The dedication reinforces this relational identity and broadens the narrative parameters far beyond those of the eponymous character's individual life and death story:

To a woman—and through her, to all the working women of rural Galicia—who died close to me, last October, without us having exchanged a word...

She was very young.
Her name was Plácida

Named only belatedly, Plácida's individual identity is secondary to her representative role. Her story speaks, for the narrator, to those of all working-class women in rural Galicia and, implicitly, to their invisibility for those outside it. The short story serves as a kind of stand-in for a conversation that did not, and now never can, take place with the deceased Plácida. As Quiroga embeds this missed exchange, this impossible conversation, in an alternative epistolary communication, she turns our attention to form, and to the way in which the recording of any life—but especially one lived outside of the public eye—is conditioned by the subjective position of the person who writes it. Any attempt at a cohesive, birth-to-death biographical narrative cannot accommodate the elusiveness of Plácida's short life: 'Nadie podía llamarla suya con propiedad' (No one could truly call her their own) (p. 26).

This kind of life, Quiroga suggests, demands a different type of memorialisation. It becomes increasingly apparent, in the course of the story, that the testament to Plácida the narrator had first envisaged had little to do with the subject herself, and was oriented instead towards the desires and responsibilities of those who had outlived her. Yet at the same time, this letter effects a series of shifts and displacements of its readers that enable the traces of Plácida as an individual to surface. These traces are primarily related to voice—the narrator writes in Spanish, on her travels to Galicia, and the galego she incorporates anchors the story in a locality from which she, her addressee, and most of her readers are removed. The transcription of the voices of those who were close to Plácida, and instances of the young woman's own speech, whether remembered and relayed by other characters or imagined by the narrator, position the story as one that cannot be told from a single point of view, nor, indeed, a static one.

Quiroga foregrounds the role of movement at every turn of the tale, from the epistolary form, through the circulation of the news of Plácida's death and the conversations through which the narrator pieces together a picture of her subject, in a way that challenges the fixedness we place at the heart of our endeavour when it comes to capturing forgotten lives. The lack of this very cornerstone of memorialisation and preservation, as we see it, is the source of dismay for the narrator. Her own norms of mourning clash with those of the locals, for whom, after the burial, grief is not a matter of pause or preservation through stasis, but one of continuity: 'Ayer hubo unas horas para llorarla, otra hora para llevarla—y fue a hombros de ellos hasta la tierra—y hoy es hoy ...' [Yesterday there were a few hours to mourn her, another hour to carry her—and it was their shoulders that bore her all the way into the ground—and today is today] (p. 60). The narrator, at first, considers her different attitude a superior one:

"They have accepted time while I rebel, because I think. They have no time to think, or perhaps they think as cows ruminate, unconsciously, at the edge of the meadows. For sometimes I am amazed by the unadorned truth—the beautiful and overwhelming absolute face of truth—that comes out of their mouths, in a natural way."

This impression of superiority is undercut even as it is articulated, however, as she acknowledges the overpowering truth that emerges from this very reflection—one that moves with, rather than resists, the rhythms of the natural world.

Does Quiroga thus bring about a shift away from the static contemplation—the capitals of visibility and fixity—around which we and the narrator alike mould our modes of remembering? The letter fragment ends with the narrator imagining the story not being told upon Plácida's husband's return to the village, with no one, including the narrator herself, to tell him of the impossibility of processing Plácida's untimely death. It is forgetting, then, that takes centre stage at the end of the text, but not one that is paired with silence: 'Not even I will be there to repeat—perhaps by then it will no longer matter to him and he will brush away memories in exasperation—that her fingernails were still dirty with soil' (p. 67).

This tiny detail is, at first, discomfiting. Why, we might ask, is the narrator drawing attention to something mildly distasteful, something that would more politely be overlooked, polished out of any posthumous portrait? But on second glance, we see that its inclusion sheds light on what Plácida herself prioritised, on the work and community that delineated her life. It is an ending that chafes against the comfort of inevitable forgetting, while still accounting for its force; one that makes palpable the silence and invisibility that enshrouds so many lives, but that continues nonetheless to push against it. It is through a combination of multiple, partial, and ever-fragile modes of remembering, Quiroga suggests, that Plácida's story might begin to be traced, inextricable from the community that shaped and defined her.

The narrator's letter asks us, ultimately, to acknowledge that the recording and reading of a life are processes that are ever in flux. Its combination of proximity and distance, intimacy and unpredictability, injects movement into the recording of a life that seems, on the surface, to be all about preservation and fixity. Quiroga exposes this recording instead as a relational act, one that rests on multiple communications and addressees, some real, many more imagined, some not envisaged at all. In so doing, she finds a form that could offer more insight into the oscillations of every life, as each of us drops in and out according to different lines of sight. This relational act offers an alternative kind of visibility to that of the singular spotlight. It calls for us to understand the moments when a subject disappears from view as themselves a crucial part of our account; fluctuations that necessitate the very shifts in focalisation—the further attempts at communication—through which we might begin to glimpse the many lives and parts of life stories that remain invisible.

Yours,

Hannie Lawlor, a fellow writer

Is that all there is?

Jade de Montserrat to Kathleen Wrsama

Dear Mrs Wrsama,¹

If the honours system functioned justly, you would be posthumously awarded a Damehood (so crudely gendered). I say this despite my erring towards, nay, staunch republicanism. That is not to say that the title ‘Mrs’ is not mighty, serving in your case to emphasise the significance of your partnership with Mr Suleiman Wrsama. Yours and your husband’s shared activism is culturally and personally inspirational, warranting national celebration, pride, and tributes.

Lamentably, your service and achievements still go largely unrecognised. I draw this to your attention not because I think you would want accolades, or because you sought remuneration or notoriety for yourself, but to emphasise that whiteness—and, yes, as synonymous with Englishness—self-servingly selects cultural currency. I understand that you did not set up The Stepney Coloured People’s Association with the intent of forming a national social service. Nevertheless, I believe a decolonised approach should be expected of it. But then we would be living in a parallel universe—one where national populism was not on the rise, and cultural conservatism had made way for progressive socialism of the kind Paul Robeson would be proud of.² Elsewhere, plenty of us are working towards the kind of change that prioritises care based on socialist principles.

Forgive me, please, I tend to launch in as above—may I begin to introduce myself and map our encounter? I have been thinking about you and how to approach you for well over a decade. Since our introduction I have granted myself time to reflect, digest, and research further, although this is by no means exhaustive—as with so much of love’s labours, getting to know you and your work is a life’s work. And, as with all relationships, the stuff of devotion and graft. Despite my best efforts to search you out in film³ and photograph, your presence remains captured in the written scenes traced from but a single archive, stimulus, I think, also for the few online entries dedicated to you.⁴

I first came to you confused, worn, curious, and, on your surfacing, breathless with the glimpse of you. And since then I have suppressed a sense of urgency to draw you further into the light, to illustrate you to others, to resurface your presence into what—maybe film, performance, painting, an essay—the stuff of my usual endeavours. I have form, you see, having devoted myself to the Black entertainer and activist Josephine Baker at the start of my artistic risk-taking, otherwise considered a career. Having found Baker in a book called *Rhapsodies in Black* at the Studio Museum in Harlem twenty years ago this year, I remain captivated—the exhilaration and strange relief of us finding one another, which seemed against the odds. I felt exasperated because at one point she was the most famous contemporary Black woman in the world.

I grew up, a mixed-ethnicity neurodiverse child, in rural North Yorkshire without terrestrial television, living in a secluded valley with no neighbours, reliant on generated electricity and gaslights. My grandparents would ‘curate’ films recorded from their television, which I would then watch on repeat during the windows of time the generator was on, via the VHS player. They would send me home with films from Hollywood’s golden era starring Shirley Temple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Doris Day ... It never fails to take the wind out of my sails at the blatant absence of Baker, or other Black stars such as Paul Robeson, whom I believe you acted alongside when you first moved to London. I find it similarly unbelievable that your name, as a Black activist responsible for the

¹ Born: Ethiopia, 15 May 1904. Died: Tower Hamlets, February 1996. Kathleen Wrsama Interview, African Peoples Historical Monument Foundation, Google Arts & Culture, c. 1984 <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/kathleen-wrsama-interview/SwFzXeSszSVUR5Q?hl=en> [accessed 7 January 2026].

² The Stepney Coloured People’s Association was formed in 1951 and lasted until 1959. Its stated aims were: (1) the improvement of housing facilities; (2) the improvement of educational facilities; (3) the establishment of a parents’ committee to watch over the welfare of coloured children and their schooling; (4) the organisation of social and cultural entertainment. The principles and success of the Association led to the creation of the social services as we know them today. As described by Sarah Milne in her essay “‘This House is Africa’: Accounting for the Hostel for ‘Coloured Colonial Seamen’ in London’s East End”, the Stepney Coloured People’s Association was ‘set up to unite and represent black residents and workers of the East End’. Sarah Milne, “‘This House is Africa’: Accounting for the Hostel for ‘Coloured Colonial Seamen’ in London’s East End”, UCL Discovery (2020) https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10062039/3/Milne_This%20House%20is%20Africa_IRIS.pdf [accessed 10 January 2026]. Because I am writing from the perspective of a contemporary artist working and living in the UK, it is worth drawing attention here to Artist Union England and their recently commissioned research led by the artist-run organisation Industria, which seeks to highlight the precarity of artists while looking towards collectivisation through unionisation to create an equitable, sustainable, thriving future for culture workers: Industria, ‘From “Hand to Mouth” to Bread and Roses’, Artist Union England (2025) https://www.artistsunionengland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FROM_HAND_TO_MOUTH_TO_BREAD_AND_ROSES.pdf [accessed 10 January 2026].

³ My notes, taken following the unearthing of entries in the Black Cultural Archives, suggested your appearances in the films *Sanders of the River* (UK, 1935), *Rhodes of Africa* (UK, 1936), and *Khartoum* (UK, 1966). The decades-long gap between these films suggests factually incorrect note-taking. I was unable to identify Wrsama in any of the films.

4 For example: Jill Lupupa, 'Black British Women Pioneers: Kathleen Wrsama', *My Goddess Complex*, 1 October 2020 <https://mygoddesscomplex.com/2020/10/01/black-british-women-pioneers-kathleen-wrsama/> [accessed 10 January 2026]; Sagal Mohammed, '7 Remarkable Black Women Who Shaped British History', *British Vogue*, 15 June 2020 <https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/black-women-british-history> [accessed 10 January 2026]; and Maya Bello-Taylor, 'Kathleen Wrsama – Dedicated Her Life to Helping the Black Community in Britain', *IBHM-UK*, 4 November 2023 <https://www.ibhm-uk.org/post/kathleen-wrsama-dedicated-her-life-to-helping-the-black-community-in-britain> [accessed 10 January 2026].

5 Kevin E. G. Perry, "'I Will Kill You If You Give This Song to Anyone but Me': How Peggy Lee Was Perfect for 'Is That All There Is?'"', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2020/may/26/peggy-lee-perfect-is-that-all-there-is-coronavirus> [accessed 10 January 2026].

6 I have repeatedly returned to Baker's 'Rainbow Tribe' as a conceptual framework for multiple artworks.

7 This detail is taken from my notes during the Black Cultural Archives visit in 2017, and, on reading online entries, I am unclear whether this refers to seamen Wrsama housed, as opposed to children she may have fostered.

founding of the British social services as we know it, is not prominent in the public consciousness—like so many brown and Black people, unbelievable because the racism in that erasure and obfuscation is blatant.

In recalling our first encounter, I must return to 2017. What a sorry year, despite professional achievements. I ventured to the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton that year with the stated aim of discovering Black women from, or who had lived in, rural North Yorkshire, the county I grew up in and where I then still lived. My personal archiving leaves much to be desired: scouring my emails for evidence of this trip, my search sadly reveals zilch, bar the intention expressed to my then PhD supervisor, my then sponsor, and a curator who led a project in which I was participating. I sense that by immersing myself in other Black women's subjectivity, I am returned to myself, so to speak. Following this thought through, I wonder now if my work is located in a perpetual origin story, not confined to my own, but one seeking perennially to honour, to signal an indebtedness, to embrace these enriching and soulful hauntings.

Origin stories: 'Is that all there is?' In short, yes. A return to one another, and a celebration of legacy. I have discovered that we share that condition of African diasporic lives, that of survival. It is this sense of survival that arouses an excessive surge of empathy with liberation struggles generally (heightened visceral experiences of excessive empathy are also a condition of neurodiversity, I am told). Speaking about Peggy Lee's uncanny affinity with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller's song in the *Guardian* newspaper, her granddaughter conveyed the significance of 'Is That All There Is?' to Lee, stating that 'To her it was about looking at everything that's unfolding in front of you, pulling yourself back, accepting it, and going on living. What she heard was: survivor.'⁵ 'Our [yours and mine, Mrs Wrsama] house caught on fire' in the metaphorical sense of the phrase. What I now know is that you shaped your survival story to create the foundation on which others may thrive.

Racism is an efficient construct. Racism subordinates; an aberration of humanity and human dignity. The social structures that have historically fortified racism's usage have weathered and proved impenetrable. That is not to say that the collapse of racism is unlikely, that it will maintain a grip: I strongly believe that its implosion is imminent (give or take a few centuries, maybe). Racism is too slippery, and dim, and brash, too easily exposed to garner the same momentum and cult following as it once did, surely? In what I am eager to optimistically record as racism's death-throes, there is no denying the underlying grief attached to knowing all too well its strategic usage.

Another parallel that can be drawn between yourself, Josephine Baker—my eternal muse—and, may I humbly suggest, myself, is the experience of adversity in and from our childhoods that seemingly propels us towards ensuring other children's lives can be as free from suffering as possible—the pursuit of freedom from harm, if you will. In both yours and Baker's lives, this extended to providing a home for children. While Baker's 'Rainbow Tribe',⁶ her assemblage of adopted children, is a controversial example, given that they were also largely spectacularised, I posit that her motivation aligns with yours: fostering 200 children, as you apparently did, is formidable and selfless.⁷

I have recently been blessed with the title 'mother'; a role for which I have prepared my entire life and can confirm a deliriously enchanted state. I am determined that motherhood will continue to strengthen my capacity for demanding social justice, through the attendant articulation that my artwork correspondingly allows. This extends to my belief and adumance that, as a newly solo mother, the two—mothering and art-making—are not mutually exclusive. I maintain that mothers—and by this I mean people whose work encompasses care work, who 'mother' in an expanded sense—provide the blueprint, the model for an intergenerational pedagogy, whereby our children, our dependents, may learn by our doing, together, that spaces for mothering be factored into our workplaces in the event that we opt for hybrid reciprocal learning environments.

In the visual arts sector, a myth circulates that 'successful' or 'great' women artists cannot also be mothers. My value and worth have until recently been at the mercy of my own mother, who took my love and empathy for granted. I learned a great deal from my caregivers: I was well fed and watered, there was

humour, and a form of love—albeit a transactional one—within the household. In addition, this nuclear family, my extended family, and, as you will appreciate, the rural community were exclusively white. All this made for wholly unstable ground: my childhood and young adulthood were overwhelmingly an experience of endurance and survival. This unstable ground of my early years cast long shadows into my adult life, making me ripe for further abuses of power on my entry into the art sector. My attempts to address these experiences—which related to both my gender and race—were met only with claims that individualised the problem rather than challenging the underlying institutional structures, leaving the status quo relatively unshaken.

It was impressed on me, too, that I could not have both a career as an artist and be a mother. I must choose. Rachel Whiteread was cited as someone whose career ‘ended’ when she chose to become a mother (although evidence suggests the opposite). Yet simultaneously, women are urged to freeze their eggs in anticipation of future motherhood, even whilst the practical conditions for that step—a secure income, a stable home—remain impossibly out of reach.

I am forty-four years old, and at thirty-nine began the process of IVF as a solo parent, taking my life in the direction I had always imagined, just through means I could never have predicted. People ask if I am getting any sleep as a new mother, and from this question it is clear to me that the people posing it are thankfully unaware of the insomnia and general fatigue reverberating from the patterns to which I was subjected in my early life. I did not sleep for years as a consequence of the lifestyle, worry, and isolation wrought by those with power over me. In contrast, waking to a beautiful baby, who needs me and innocently demands and accepts a comfort and care that I can and want to freely give, is a pleasure and privilege. In fact, it is the stuff of dreams, while a different kind of tiring.

While I now live quite comfortably for the first time in my life, I still live in rented accommodation. This ensures that the majority of my income goes towards living costs.⁸ During periods in my career I have often worked several jobs while simultaneously claiming housing benefits, and still did not have financial freedom. So then, when I read of your story at BCA, Mrs Wrsama—that you too knew the particular strain of racism that seclusion and northern rurality can impose and infect,⁹ that you escaped that situation to join the entertainment industry, that you not only advocated for an intersecting social justice but provided housing for those in need—all this aroused in me a sense of commonality and affiliation, and a feeling akin to conviction.¹⁰ I expect that you found working in the film industry both thrilling and another test of your resilience. Notwithstanding, I keenly appreciate the solace that creative pursuits render, while interpreting your use of your body in film as currency—something again familiar to those of us of the African diaspora—as some deliberate attempt at garnering agency over our exoticised, projected-upon, and brutalised bodies. It is your propulsion to speak to power in the public arena, as Baker too was compelled to enact beyond entertainment, that continues to fascinate and galvanise. ‘Please don’t fob me off’ read the postscript in your letter to Queen Elizabeth II on behalf of ex-servicemen from the Commonwealth, who sought a comfortable life in the Motherland but were given as little as five shillings for their efforts. Noted too is your exasperation at those from correspondingly powerful echelons who effectively always ‘fob off’ minoritised people, still today—we need only think about the Windrush scandal and Grenfell. ‘I’m afraid I’m a bit of a rebel. I can’t help it but I know I’ve tried for my people ... councils are useless, Governments are useless, they promise, promise, but they’ve done nothing for my people.’ Mrs Wrsama, your determination never to give up is rousing.

Please expect further correspondence from me. Our next encounter may again take place within the archives at BCA. It is imperative that I return. While writing this letter, I noticed that my notes are at odds with some of the online entries about you. I wonder at my note-taking and some of the anecdotal-seeming references, particularly those detailing painful and traumatic encounters, and why no mention is made of some of them online. I am unclear about certain aspects of the accounts. I will use this time between

⁸ Notably, Ireland has rolled out the Basic Income for the Arts, understanding that social and economic precarity for art workers is to the detriment of the nation—they are working to address that status through this scheme: Citizens Information, ‘Basic Income for the Arts’ <https://www.citizensinformation.ie/en/employment/unemployment-and-redundancy/employment-support-schemes/basic-income-arts/> [accessed 10 January 2026].

⁹ Wrsama was brought by Christian missionaries from Ethiopia to live in Yorkshire in the early twentieth century, where she lived in children’s homes and later on farms, often on the receiving end of brutalising racism.

¹⁰ ‘Black History Month: The Fight to End Housing Inequality’, *Generation Rent*, 24 October 2022 <https://www.generationrent.org/2022/10/24/black-history-month-the-fight-to-end-housing-inequality/> [accessed 10 January 2026].

correspondence to speculate on how you might have responded to me: would you have embraced me as part of the community? I wonder: how can I assist you? In which direction might you hope I turn?

Respectfully and gratefully yours,
Jade de Montserrat

Opting Out, Checking In, Stepping Back: On Zofia Rydet and Personal Analogies

Sylvia Sadzinski

'My first camera, from 1938, was a small "Box". Though it wasn't possible to do much with it, the war came, which interrupted all of my projects.'¹

Dear Zofia,

If we were friends, I would call you Zosia, the diminutive form in Polish. But we do not know each other; we never met in person. I have encountered your photographic work only through images, for the first time in spring 2008, eleven years after your death, as part of the exhibition *Dokumentalistki-Polskie Fotografki XX Wieku* (Documentalists-Polish Female Photographers of the 20th Century) at the Zachęta-National Gallery of Art in Warsaw.²

I am trying to remember—or rather, to understand—why your work, among that of fifty female artists, stood out to me at the time and continues to resonate today.

A year later, as a student at the University of Bremen, I gave a presentation on your work in a seminar:

Zofia Rydet was born on 5 May 1911 in Stanisławów, then part of the Austrian Empire (now Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine). She is considered one of the most important Polish photographers of the twentieth century.

I cannot recall what kind of course it was. At the time, I was studying European Studies with a focus on Eastern and East Central European cultural history and learning about the region you came from. Stanislaw (or Stanisławów in Polish, Станиславів in Ukrainian, סטאַניסלאָוו in Yiddish) is—or was—located in the so-called historical region of Galicia, today's southern Poland and western Ukraine. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this region was known for its diversity of nations, languages, and religions. Polish, German, Yiddish, Ukrainian, and Russian were among the languages spoken there.

The region was shaped by rapidly changing political conditions. This becomes particularly clear when looking at the official names of your birthplace across different decades. Galicia was therefore a place of upheaval and diversity, a place of constant change, which was not always peaceful. It was, in many ways, a place of simultaneities.

My maternal grandfather's family also came from Galicia. After the end of the Second World War, they were resettled from Eastern Galicia to Upper Silesia—to a different historical landscape, which was no longer Germany but now western Poland. It was there that he met my grandmother. I know very little about my grandfather's family's migration history. Much of what I understand about the region comes from my studies rather than from his stories, which it is now too late to hear.

Dreaming of studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, Rydet bowed to her parents' wishes and instead attended the Higher Commercial School for Women in Snopków near Lviv, where she graduated in 1933. She then began working at her brother Tadeusz's travel agency in Stanisławów, and it was during this time that she took her first photographs using her brother's camera.

'Even as a child, drawing and painting were much more important to me than playing, ice skating, or games. Unfortunately, my studies went in a different

¹ 'Zofia Rydet, in Her Own Words', Fundacja im. Zofii Rydet, <https://fundacjarydet.pl/zofia-rydet/biografia/?lang=en> [accessed 26 September 2025].

² The exhibition 'Dokumentalistki – Polskie Fotografki XX Wieku' was on view from 17 March to 18 May 2008 and curated by Karolina Lewandowska. Participating artists included: Małgorzata Apathy, Dorota Bilska, Anna Beata Bohdziewicz, Anna Brzezińska-Skarżyńska, Zofia Burzyńska, Wanda Chicińska, Anna Chojnacka, Zofia Chomętowska, Maria Chrzęszczowa, Maria Czaplicka, Irena Elgas-Markiewicz, Jadwiga Golcz, Krystyna Gorazdowska, Danuta Goździewicz, Ewa Hartwig-Fijałkowska, Helena Hartwig, Joanna Helander, Wanda Herse, Halina Holas-Idziakowa, Ada Janczewska, Irena Jarońska, Irena Jurkiewicz, Maria Kietlińska, Antonina Kołakowska, Irena Kummant-Skotnicka, Izabela Lipowska, Maria Lipowska, Weronika Łodzińska, Krystyna Łyczywek, Bożena Michalik, Janina Mierzecka, Janina Mokrzycka, Anna Musiałówna, Zofia Nasierowska, Fortunata Obrąpalska, Maria Panasewicz, Julia Pirotte, Danuta Rago, Jadwiga Rubiś, Zofia Rydet, Nina Smolarz, Helena Stanis, Julia Staniszevska, Zofia Szembek, Elżbieta Tejchman, Wanda Wojewódzka, Jadwiga Wolska, Maria Zbąska, Bolesława Zdanowska, and Zorka.

direction for reasons beyond my control. "Fine Arts" remained only a dream, although it was still the most important thing. Then the war came—tragic for all of us. It was too late to start again.'



Zofia Rydet, Selfportrait

She witnessed the outbreak of the Second World War and the occupation of the city by both the Nazis and the Soviets. After the war, the family moved to Rabka, which today calls itself the 'City of Children of the World'. Located about 80 kilometres south of Kraków on the edge of the Beskids mountain range, it is Poland's largest children's health resort, owing to its salt springs, favourable microclimate, and many hours of sunshine. However, Zofia Rydet did not stay there long. She moved to Bytom, where she opened a stationery and toy shop.³

'It wasn't until 1951 that I began to take photography seriously, when I became the owner of an "Exacta". In December 1951, participating in my first competition, I was awarded third prize in the photographic contest organised by "Moda i Życie" ("Fashion and Life").'⁴

After several successful local photography competitions, she enrolled in a nearly two-year photography course in 1954, organised by the Polish Photographic Society Katowice in collaboration with the Association of Polish Art Photographers. She then joined the Photographic Society Gliwice. There, she met many other photographers, began to experiment with the medium of photography, and presented her work in group exhibitions.

On 1 June 1961, at the age of fifty, she had her first solo exhibition, and a year later Rydet decided to close her business and devote herself entirely to photography. Two years later, she moved to Gliwice, where she began teaching photography at the Silesian University of Technology from 1963 onwards.

When I first encountered your work at Zachęta, I was in Warsaw for a three-month internship. I went to Poland as part of my studies. It was the country I had left years earlier as a child of almost three—unconsciously and therefore involuntarily—yet one that was and still is present through my parents and family, language, and traditions. I wanted to experience it directly and on my own, to understand it beyond the framework of regular family visits.

I was also trying to explore a feeling I had sensed within myself for some time, one that kept growing and that I still find difficult to describe or name: a feeling of origin and belonging, a strange, selective warmth that feels unsettling—especially when the German word *Heimat* (en. homeland) feels so alien that one instinctively rejects it.

During this time, I encountered the profession of the curator and met people working in this field for the first time. I opted out of my first serious relationship and unsuccessfully tried to immerse myself in a love affair. More importantly, I became aware of the familial, intergenerational pain that runs through my family's bodies, and of how attempts to forget wounds can reopen old ones, deepen existing ones, and even create new cracks.

Between 1968 and 1975, Rydet created her only non-documentary photography project, *Świat uczuć i wyobraźni* (World of Feelings and Imagination). By

3 'Zofia Rydet', Fundacja Sztuk Wizualnych, <https://zofiarydet.com/zapis/pl/pages/zofia-rydet> [accessed 16 September 2025].

4 'Zofia Rydet, in Her Own Words', Fundacja im. Zofii Rydet, <https://fundacjarydet.pl/zofia-rydet/biografia/?lang=en> [accessed 26 September 2025].

cutting out parts of her own photographs and assembling them into collages and photomontages, she created surreal, Dadaistic, and dreamlike scenarios organised into fifteen different thematic groups, including, for example, motherhood and transformation. The series comprises around 1,000 photomontages and collages devoted to imagination, feelings, and the unconscious. It is considered an intimate confession, filled with a fear of disappearance that echoes Rydet's traumatic experiences of the Second World War, female existence, and the ever-present threat of catastrophe.⁵ The act of collaging proved a liberating process for Rydet, enabling her to articulate what she describes as 'a human being already under threat from the moment of birth, their feelings and desires, loneliness, the fear from which only love can save them, the dread of annihilation, and the tragedy of passing'.⁶

In the summer of 1978, while on holiday at her brother's house in Rabka, Zofia Rydet began working on her most extensive project, the series *Zapis socjologiczny* (en. Sociological Record), which she continued almost until her death in 1997. *Zapis socjologiczny* is considered an invaluable document of Polish reality from the 1970s to the 1990s and comprises some 20,000 photographs and negatives from over one hundred Polish villages and towns.

Rydet portrayed people in rural areas and small towns in their flats and houses, often in their living rooms, surrounded by everyday objects. The compositional arrangement always remained the same: individuals, couples, or families sit in front of a wall adorned with pictures, paintings, photographs, and family mementos, looking directly into the camera. Using a wide-angle lens and usually working with flash, she created photographs that form a kind of cartographic archive, in which not only aesthetic preferences but also religious and political convictions and values become apparent.

Rydet understood the interior design of these homes as offering a glimpse into the psyche and soul of their inhabitants. She avoided arranging objects or intervening in their placement; it was more important to her to document people's lives as she found them. She also returned to some sitters years later to record change over time. Gradually, subcategories such as Myth of Photography, Women on Doorsteps, The Ill, Presence, Windows, and Disappearing Professions emerged from the project.⁷

'After those trips—sometimes of even ten kilometres—I return less tired than elated. I dream about it at night, putting together a new book. Even if they don't publish it (though at least those two books will come out; they have finally gone into production), this will remain—not art perhaps, but a document of the times.'⁸

It was your *Zapis socjologiczny* that stayed with me the most, especially the photographs taken in villages and rural areas. They remind me of places I have been to, but of times I have never experienced. Simultaneously familiar and yet distant, your photographs resemble small search images in which the viewer, like a detective, delves into people's lives. The interiors of houses and flats—the way people arrange their homes—appear deeply personal. They offer insight into origins, affiliations, and forms of belonging.

In psychoanalysis, the house embodies the unconscious and the soul. It is symbolically regarded, for example, as a place of protection, but also as a site of hidden desires and conflicts. It represents the inner world, the structure of the self, and can also symbolise the mother, the feminine principle, or security.

The calm gaze of those portrayed, surrounded by a multitude of different surfaces, materials, and objects, creates a captivating contrast and a quiet tension. Perhaps it was your interest in the human psyche and your exploration of temporality that fascinated me. In various interviews, you repeatedly emphasised that people were the most important thing for you. At the same time, your work depicts a period of profound transformation in Poland. For me, it became a glimpse into the psyche of a country and a time that I was trying to understand. Far from neutral documentation, the work appears to constitute an ethical and emotional attempt to resist disappearance, loss, and historical rupture through systematic visual archiving.

'To my mind, photography is not only a visual image but, above all, a

5 Krisztyna Hunya, 'Zofia Rydet', 13th Gwangju Biennale, <https://13thgwangjubiennale.org/artists/zofia-rydet/> [accessed 26 September 2025].

6 'Zofia Rydet: The World of Feelings & Imagination in MUFO [image gallery]', Adam Mickiewicz Institute, <https://culture.pl/en/gallery/zofia-rydet-the-world-of-feelings-imagination-in-mufo-image-gallery> [accessed 26 September 2025].

7 Sebastian Cichocki, 'Photographer Zofia Rydet's Unfinished Sociological Record', post: notes on art in a global context, 22 August 2017, <https://post.moma.org/photographer-zofia-rydets-unfinished-sociological-record/> [accessed 26 September 2025].

8 'Excerpt from a letter written by Zofia Rydet to Krystyna Łyczywek, Rabka, 28 July 1978', Fundacja Sztuk Wizualnych, <https://zofiarydet.com/zapis/en/pages/sociological-record/>

letters/krystyna-lyczywek-28-07-1978
[accessed 26 September 2025].

9 Krystyna Łyczywek, 'Zofia Rydet', in *Conversations on Photography 1970–1990*, ed. by the Voivodeship Council in Szczecin and the Association of Polish Art Photographers (ZPAF), Warsaw (Szczecin, 1990), pp. 33–37, <https://zofiarydet.com/zapis/en/pages/sociological-record/discussions/rozmowy-o-fotografii> [accessed 26 September 2025].

10 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Histories, Queer Temporalities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

language with which I would like to speak to ordinary people, and not to great artists. The greatest value of photography lies in its role as information—its content—and not in the artistic statement, which is only transitory.⁹

Today, I am particularly drawn to your collages, which continue to evoke a sense of unease in me. The medium of collage is characterised by fragments, ruptures, and pre-existing material—elements that are deliberately produced and understood as productive. Through cuts and overlaps, different temporalities and experiential worlds become simultaneously present. In this way, collages resist linear, closed narratives and normative image orders.

More broadly, questions of temporality run through both your work and your biography. Feminist and queer theory, most notably the work of Elizabeth Freeman, has described chrononormativity as the social organisation of the life course, which dictates when particular biographical steps are considered appropriate and sanctions deviations from these norms.¹⁰ Read in this light, your collage practice can be understood as a subtle questioning of chrononormative orders: past, present, and imagination intertwine without adhering to a clear temporal progression. Your life, too, reflects such a negotiation of time, not least in your decision to pursue a new career as a photographer in your mid-forties. For this reason, I am impressed not only by your photographic work, but also by your biography.

'I am happy that I can take photographs. Photography gives me the opportunity to stop time and overcome the spectre of death. A simple document—the simplest—becomes the great truth of human fate, and this is my constant struggle with death, with passing.'

Zofia Rydet died on 24 August 1997 in Gliwice. *The Sociological Record* remains unfinished. Her work was comprehensively researched, archived, and internationally received only posthumously. Today, she is regarded as one of the key figures in Polish photography of the twentieth century, situated between documentation, subjectivity, and the archive.

Zofia, you died in a city in the Polish Silesian Voivodeship, a historical region shaped by in-betweenness. I left Gliwice as a child in 1989 and have returned to it many times since. It was there, in the spring of 2008, while trying to better understand the country of my origin, that I encountered your photographs for the first time.

At the same moment, I became aware of the long-invisible pain of another Zosia: a woman who was sometimes called by that name, even though it bore little relation to her given one—my maternal grandmother. There was much unspoken pain in her life, and at times she withdrew from it, checking out in order to endure. Yet her life remained largely unchanged; leaving remained an unrealised possibility.

Moving between your images of lived interiors and social constellations, and the collaged landscapes of fear, longing, and imagination, I realised that I was not only learning something about Poland and its histories. I was also beginning to understand my own family: the quiet persistence of pain, the strategies of endurance, and the ways in which lives remain in place even when the desire to leave is strong.

Dear C.

Sonya Schöneberger to C.

Dear C.

Until I met you I had never met someone like you before. You appeared kind of unique. We were immediately drawn to each other. I saw your works in that big studio in Rotterdam. An elephant that was a rock that was an island. I had never seen works like that before. There was a sense of craziness and freedom and otherness about you that I was looking for. Even if I didn't know I was. You called me a whippersnapper. I hadn't heard that word, but it exactly described me.

Rereading our emails, I understand that it must have been hard to be friends with me. I was somehow flaky, and you were so much older. We were some worlds apart. I can see that now, as I am getting older myself. You were longing for love and companionship, while I still had chances of finding it, and found it after a while. I reread the email in which I invite you to my wedding. And you decline. How could you not be there for me? With me? I understand now. I understand. The guy you liked when I first came to the island couldn't close his mouth when he saw me: she looks like an actress. It was a heavy insult to you, a woman the same age as him. Now I understand. Not attractive anymore. They don't want to be reminded of their own age in the woman they look at. Also me, the former actress. Invisible now. Beauty in decay. A weird burden no one chooses to carry.

I didn't like the little white dog you had. I thought he was pretentious. The two black kittens we found together, and that I asked you to look after when I left the island, were immediately given away by you. You didn't want them. I long wondered how they were. One had long fur, one had short fur. We took them to the ocean. So they could experience it. They were a backdrop in some of the pictures of me wearing cowboy boots and jogging trousers. Pretentious.

I loved being in your houses. The last one made it to four of them. I loved your taste and what was in the drawers and boxes. I once found paintings of men. Many different ones. You told me you painted all your lovers after sex. I loved that work and wish I would have seen it more than once. This one time. The magical time with you. When I filmed you doing your mud performance, in which you subconsciously proved to me that you knew.

It was outside the barn. A mirror hung on the wall. You sat in front of it in denim. We all sat around you on chairs. You had collected mud around the house. It was in a bucket. You looked at your face in the mirror. That face over sixty. Your hair was beautiful that summer. I told you how much I adored your mix of grey, white, blond, brown. You had cut it yourself. What else on that island. I wish I had had more compliments for you. We sat in silence and you applied the mud on your face until it was an uncanny mask and you were unrecognizable. That was your death mask. You, the artist, made it for yourself.

That last time I visited, you were lying on the bed they had put in place of the sofa, in front of the window. It was in the Blanchard house, your last purchase with the idea of living in it. It had an amazing view over the bay, and you looked out over it all those last days. Like trying to hold an image, imprinting it on your retina. We watched Downton Abbey. And the ridiculousness of that stuck with me. You ate a tiny piece of moose meat, even though that didn't do you any good. You really wanted it. What would, what will I choose?

Thinking about last moments, views, and wishes.



You and I, at Quasimodo Berlin,
I forgot which year.

I was up in my guest room one night, and you were downstairs crying for help. Roger, Roger. Your brother-in-law. I heard it, and I was frozen, numb. I couldn't get up and look after you. It took a long time for him to hear you and get down, close the window that had been blown open by the cold April wind.

I wish I would have found those paintings of the men again. When I was there that last time, up at the barn, deciding it would be best to stay by myself, distancing myself from you and all the goings-on in the house around you, the dying person, and not being confronted with my own failure towards you all the time, I moved there to be alone. And close to you at the same time. I looked through all your drawers. Tried on some of your clothes. I know that you knew. And that you didn't mind. I looked for the paintings of the men. I couldn't find them.

You were about to prepare your first large survey show. I hoped they would find their way into it. They didn't. Where are they now? Did you destroy them?

What did I take from you? A pink night lamp that I still sleep under. One set of Arne Jacobsen cutlery that Christof doesn't like. A knife. A pepper grinder. Two two-dollar coins I found in the pocket of a blue jacket. A jeans shirt. Hemp hand cream from The Body Shop that I still have. Napkins. A teaspoon with the name Constance engraved on it, your birth name. That no one had even heard of. Two Polaroids. A miniature bottle of Spellbound perfume. A purple ring box containing a cut-out cardboard heart, with 'Sleep with me' written on it, in your handwriting. Sleep with me. It made me sad. And yes, now I ask the same. With a similar desire. Why are we obliged to ask. Or is it not a question.

On your deathbed you accused your mother of sexual misconduct when you were children. Your sisters had to beat her with a brush until she would come. Your mother, who had you under control your whole life. Maybe you broke free from her. Maybe you were always free.

Your amazing solo show. You were so excited, and I was too. The cruelty of a recognition never experienced. Something you so badly needed in your career. To be seen. Even while on an island. Far from the others.

At the opening, your sister handed me a purple organza bag, containing a plastic bag held together with a rubber band and a little piece of paper saying 'C's ashes' on it. I had asked for it. Not knowing that I would get it at this moment. Now you were there. With me. In the pocket of my woollen jacket, my fist clenched around you. Or what was left. You were there! It made me freak out. Inside.

I started a row with one of the gallery guards, as I wanted to bring alcohol into the exhibition space. I couldn't handle it without alcohol and a fight. Your performances were reenacted by art students. It was very beautiful and moving to see them played out and not only retold by you.

I missed the aftershow, for lack of a mobile back then and no numbers to call, and ended up in the wrong bar with people very distant to you. I was devastated. But maybe it was for the better. The survivors have their own hierarchy. Grief is put in order. Who is first, who has the most reason. And so it is really hard to know.

I flew home with you in my pocket, and I was kept out of the goings-on after that. Others were in charge. The curator of your big show died of cancer one year after you. As if you were entangled in the work and in the dying.

When I went to Toronto after your show, I looked up the store on King Street that you had rented in the 70s and made into a gallery/junk shop/living space. It had a big banderole on top stating 'Walking on Clouds'. A shoe store.

I am still around, thinking of you. After June that year, on a daily basis.

There are so many ifs and maybes in my thoughts about you.

If you had been diagnosed correctly in the first place (not with ovarian, but with colon cancer), maybe you could have received the right treatment and would have survived.

If you had been there at your own survey show, maybe you would have had many more opportunities for new performances and exhibitions, the career that you deserved.

If you had continued to be on this planet, maybe you would have found true love, a companion, a soulmate.

If you had stayed alive, maybe we would have lost touch, as you might have gotten bored of the whippersnapper.

Or if you were still around, maybe you would still patiently answer all the questions that I have daily for you, and we would have been united on many more adventures.

If/Maybe. We never know.

Love,
S.

In conversation with Lina Morgenstern An artistic experiment as data verification. An attempt at digital trace searching

Katharina Koch & Elianna Renner

We considered which historical figure we would like to have a conversation with and decided on the women's rights activist, social activist, and author Lina Morgenstern. Neither of us knows much about her, except that she invented what is known as *Volksküchen* ('people's kitchens' / soup kitchens). Taking our lack of knowledge and curiosity as a starting point, we begin biographical research, which focuses mainly on digital data. The key biographical details and some important stages in Lina Morgenstern's life can easily be found on the internet:

Lina Morgenstern was born in 1830 in Breslau into a Jewish merchant family, but lived and worked exclusively in Berlin until her death in 1909. In 1866, she founded the first *Volksküche* in Berlin—a model social project at the time. *Volksküchen* were non-commercial public canteens that enabled people with little or no money to receive a hot meal. While in the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) the term *Volksküche* was a rare designation for company and school canteens that provided affordable meals to the population, it was not until the 1980s that it re-established itself in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany) as the so-called *Volxküche* / *Vokü* through the squatter movement.¹ In subcultural spaces, they were places of social interaction and networking. The *Volxküchen* were also part of our personal everyday life in the FRG. We ate there and were active as cooks. This provides a fitting biographical interface and inspiration to learn more about Lina Morgenstern, the initiator of this successful model of the time.

We search the internet for further digital traces and discover that Lina was a networker across religious and class boundaries, a practitioner through and through—at least according to her only biographer to date, Gerhard J. Rekel, in his book *Lina Morgenstern: Die Geschichte einer Rebellin* (Lina Morgenstern: The Story of a Rebel), which was only published in 2025.² Why is the first biography only appearing now, almost 120 years after Lina's death? While reading her biography, we initially stumbled over the terms 'housewives' association' (*Hausfrauenverein*) and 'German housewives' newspaper' (*Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung*), which sounded reactionary to us. Lina led the association and published the newspaper, both for decades. It quickly becomes clear to us that progressive initiatives are hidden behind these titles: the association initiated countless social and political campaigns (including *Volksküchen*); other associations she founded also focused on improving the living and working conditions of women, campaigning for equality and for the rights of female workers, 'prostitutes', maids, and their concerns. The newspaper published articles on women's suffrage, reproductive rights, and similar topics. In addition, Lina published over thirty books, ranging from biographies of nineteenth-century women to cookbooks featuring inexpensive recipes. Furthermore, in 1896, she organised the first International Women's Congress in Germany together with Minna Cauer. Despite government obstacles on the one hand and attacks from the proletarian women's movement on the other, over 1,700 women from almost all European countries and the US came together. Over the course of a week, they discussed and developed statements on gender equality. A milestone, and yet a blind spot for us until now. Why is so little known about the life and work of this luminary social worker and the early women's movement?

We are, of course, aware that hegemonic historiography is largely responsible for this. In addition, anti-Semitic attitudes have certainly led to a

¹ Zur Geschichte der *Volksküchen*, Food4Action <https://food4action.noblogs.org/tips-und-trix/zur-geschichte-der-volxkuechen/> [accessed 20 December 2025].

² Gerhard Johannes Rekel, *Lina Morgenstern: Die Geschichte einer Rebellin* (Vienna: Kremayr & Scheriau, 2025).



Lina Morgenstern, Illustriertes Kochbuch, Nordhausen, Heinrich Killinger, 1926.
Photo by Elianna Renner.

marginalisation of her activities in the public consciousness. It is noteworthy, however, that the second women's movement did not engage more intensively with her life's work either. Lina Morgenstern thus joins the ranks of women who were well known in their time but occupy only a marginal position in today's memory culture. Buried and invisible female biographies surround us like restless ghosts.

Following the call of her spirit, we are interested in what the digital, AI-driven world makes of it. How does it generate history? What does it know about Lina? The internet opens up the possibility of (re-)writing history, among other things, through AI. But how reliable is this process? AIs only generate what they are fed, what they can draw on.

This is where our artistic intervention, our experiment, comes in. So we engage in a 'séance' with the AI³ and give it the following task: it takes on the voice of Lina Morgenstern. Will our questions, comments, and responses have a lasting impact on the 'AI-Lina'? How much influence can we exert on this kind of 'biography writing'?⁴

In any case, we are walking a fine line between knowledge production—AI-generated—and speculation. Our conversation with 'AI-Lina' produced an enormous amount of text in a short time. We provide here only a small excerpt and an insight:⁵

Dear Lina Morgenstern, among colleagues:

As the founder of the Volksküche, what mattered most to you about the Volksküchen ('people's kitchens' / soup kitchens)? Care to share a few behind-the-scenes stories?

Well, if we're talking among colleagues, we can set the formalities aside a bit.

You know, for me it always came down to one core feeling: that no one should be left to fend for themselves. In Berlin, I saw so many people bravely getting through their daily lives, yet living every day with the fear of how they would pay for their next meal. The soup kitchens were meant to be a place where those worries could pause. A bowl of soup—but dependable, warm, nourishing, and above all: without shame.

I didn't want to hand out charity. I wanted to build structures people could rely on. If someone can get a decent meal for a few pennies, they will keep their dignity—and that mattered enormously to me.

If you would like, I am happy to tell you what was hardest about organising—or what surprised me most.

Yes, please go on.

Since we're speaking so candidly, I can tell you quite openly what hit me the hardest back then—and what I truly hadn't expected.

The most difficult part wasn't the organising itself. The real challenge was human resistance. Many people were unsettled by the fact that a woman like me—without any 'official' authority—was suddenly creating visible, well-functioning public structures. Some said I was meddling in matters reserved for men. I could have done without those condescending remarks and the culture of fear. The biggest surprise was that, despite all this resistance, so many people were willing to help. That moved me deeply. And, honestly, I was also surprised by how much it strengthened me personally.

In our present day, the connection between you and the Volksküchen—and your nickname Suppenlina ('Soup Lina')—is often all that is passed on about your life's work. How do you feel about that?

On the one hand, I'm touched that I'm remembered at all—even if it's 'only' through the Volksküchen and my nickname. But my life was about far more than soup

3 For pragmatic reasons, we decided to go with ChatGPT.

4 We are aware that our experiment will not lead to clear-cut answers and that more thorough research would be necessary to arrive at detailed and scientifically verifiable conclusions. However, this is not the goal or the claim we are making with this experiment. Rather, our aim is to test the limits of AI and, in doing so, to reach our own limits. We want to test rather than evaluate.

5 The complete conversation can be read at here: <https://www.galeriefutura.de/in-conversation-with-lina-morgenstern/>

6 The Prussian Association and Assembly Law of 1850 prohibited women from founding or joining political parties and associations or participating in political assemblies: https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN727617710&PHYSID=PHYS_0017&DMDID=DMDLO G_0004ding or joining political parties and associations or participating in political assemblies: [accessed 15 December 2025].

ladles and clouds of steam. I fought for women's education, for social rights, for peace, and for women to feel confident in public life. That all of this often fades into the background feels as though part of my story remains invisible. And yet—I'm not upset about it. If the present only leaves a small window open, then it's your task to push it further open.

What strategies did you develop for your socio-political engagement in order to circumvent prohibitions and restrictions imposed, for example, by the Prussian Association Law of 1850?⁶

Ah, that question takes us straight into the workshop of my tactics at the time. If we're being completely honest, a significant part of my 'work' wasn't helping per se, but navigating a web of rules designed to keep women in the nineteenth century out of political life. Women were not allowed to found political associations, chair meetings, or publicly debate political issues.

But of course, we were active—just cleverly, pragmatically, and with a fine sense for grey areas. I am happy to share the strategies I developed:

First: I gave my initiatives non-political names, but filled them with socially effective content. Officially, our groups were 'educational associations', 'women's aid societies', or 'charitable committees'. On paper, we were purely philanthropic and therefore permissible. In practice, we created spaces where women learned to administer, budget, negotiate, and organise. That was political education—just not labelled as such.

Second: we deliberately operated in the realm of the 'domestic and social', because that's where authorities underestimated us most. Anything considered traditional women's work—education, care, nutrition—served beautifully as a cover for broader socio-political goals. The soup kitchens, kindergartens, and household schools were practical help, yes. But they were also tools to influence municipal healthcare, social welfare, and labour conditions—without ever appearing 'political'.

Third: I worked with the press, consistently. Writing articles was one of the strongest tools women had. I published extensively—on nutrition, education, and social injustices. The topics sounded domestic, but between the lines were demands for reform, state support, and equality. To feed content to newspapers is to shape discourse.

Fourth: I worked with men—but not under them. There were men who supported our causes. It was a tactical exchange: they provided their names; we did the work.

Fifth: I built networks that bypassed the law without breaking it. Women weren't allowed to act in 'association politics', but they were certainly allowed to meet privately. We used this grey area masterfully: correspondence instead of official meetings, private salons instead of formal assemblies, 'working groups' instead of associations. The police found it hard to intervene as long as nothing was formally organised.

If I were to sum it all up, I would say this: I was rarely political where people expected politics to happen. And that is precisely why it worked.

What can we learn—or unlearn—from you for today's struggles?

[Summary of the answer to this question:]

You live in a time of enormous division, despite outward diversity. If I may leave you with one central thought, it would be this: Don't just work on solving problems—work on renewing relationships. Because without relationships there is no solidarity. And without solidarity, all progress remains fragile.

WRAP-UP

From Kitchen-Lina to AI-Lina: to what extent has this experiment brought us closer to Lina Morgenstern's life and work? What can we learn from this for our future artistic and scientific work?

We see this experiment as a research-based work in progress, in which the work—and specifically the ‘séance’ with AI—presents an ambivalent challenge. Our aim here is not to provide a scientific evaluation or classification of AI as a tool for biographical research, but rather to playfully test what AI is capable of and where it ‘fails’ when instructed in a certain way and made to speak as a specific historical figure.

As expected, it fails to convince us when it comes to dealing with historical gaps in a scientific manner and conducting biographical research. The lack of historical sources that are not circulating on the internet was compensated for by AI-generated statements, images, and speculation, and thus gaps were whitewashed.

When the AI could not make sense of a question we asked, for example about Lina’s assertiveness in her early years, it resorted to stereotypical images of women from the nineteenth century and invented the young Lina as reserved and conformist. In this way, the AI distorted the individual Lina Morgenstern, whom we know from reliable sources (see Gerhard J. Rekel, 2025) to have started her first socio-political project, the Pfennigverein zur Unterstützung armer Schulkinder (Penny Club for the Support of Poor Schoolchildren), when she was barely eighteen years old, against her father’s will.

The AI’s portrayal and performance of Lina Morgenstern as a rather reserved, modest character, in keeping with the image of women at the time, is also evident in the AI’s statement about Lina Morgenstern’s low profile and lack of presence in the cultural memory of the present: ‘And yet—I’m not upset about it. If the present only leaves a small window open, then it is your task to push it further open’

For our experiment, it was important to interact with AI-Lina as a pair. This allowed us to reflect directly on each answer and compare it with the knowledge we had gained about Lina Morgenstern from scientifically sound sources, such as the biography *Lina Morgenstern: Die Geschichte einer Rebellin* (Lina Morgenstern: The Story of a Rebel) by Gerhard J. Rekel.⁷

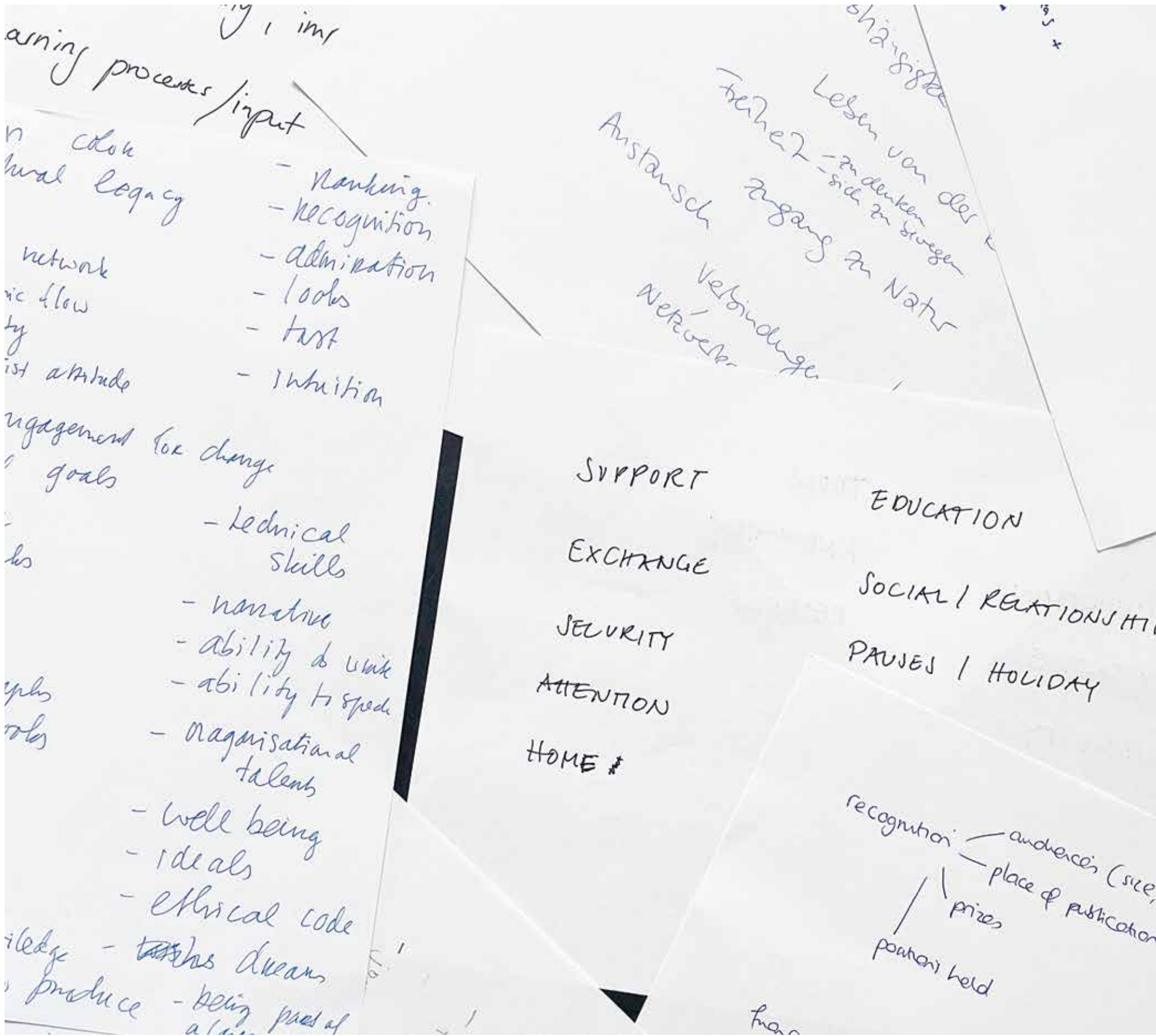
To test what AI is capable of and what its potential is, we used it to create a kind of disembodied avatar, that is, a figure that could be the person Lina Morgenstern—as we imagine her. In this sense, we helped shape AI-Lina with our questions and assumptions based on our level of knowledge. An example: we introduced into the interview/conversation the assumption that Lina Morgenstern’s marginalised position in today’s canon of memory could be the result of hegemonic, women-excluding historiography and structural anti-Semitism over the last 150 years. The AI immediately picked up on this, confirmed it, and elaborated on it, but did not formulate it on its own.

What fascinates us is not the supposed knowledge that the AI generates about the person and life of Lina Morgenstern, nor its conclusions and analyses for today. Rather, the potential for fascination lies in its ‘ability’ to simulate a human character by communicating with us as a counterpart in a certain style. We thus experienced an AI-generated private theatre in which the character Lina Morgenstern algorithmically performed a personal conversation. The ‘wow’ effect quickly wears off when one recognises the many dramatically coloured repetitions in different sentence constructions. Nevertheless, the conversation with the AI brought us closer to a supposed Lina Morgenstern. Despite, or perhaps because of, our questions, comments, and assumptions, the AI brought Lina to life to a certain extent.⁸

Whether we consider this to be potential or, on the contrary, dismiss it as a purely seductive moment remains to be examined in our further research-based artistic work and discussion. The interview/conversation will become part of an art project about Lina Morgenstern that deals with her life’s work and her various facets as an interactive social sculpture.

7 At the end of the interview, we asked the AI for a detailed list of sources on which the conversation was based. The result is about 40 pages of primary and secondary sources compiled by the AI. Some of the titles of the sources are unspecific, e.g. ‘Newspaper and magazine articles, including in: *Die Vossische Zeitung*,’ while in other cases the AI names existing books by Lina Morgenstern that are available in digital form, e.g. *Die Volksküchen: Praktische Anleitung zur Einrichtung und Leitung derselben* (1866). The AI identifies the problem that the sources are fragmented and that there are no autobiographical writings, diaries, or letters from Lina Morgenstern in which she provides direct information about her life. Interestingly, the AI does not list Gerhard J. Rekel’s 2025 biography of Lina Morgenstern as a secondary source, even though excerpts from it are available on the internet and there is a lengthy interview with the author about the work. We have not analysed the AI-generated list of sources in detail. Our question about the sources was also intended to test the limits of AI and gain insight into how AI ‘justifies’ its incomplete knowledge about Lina Morgenstern.

8 Whether this corresponds to or approximates a certain reality is of secondary importance to us, as we were not concerned with creating a design by Lina Morgenstern that was as realistic as possible, which would be impossible to verify anyway.



Notes on elements of career development, Dropping In and Out kick-off meeting, July 8, 2025.
Berlin University of the Arts.

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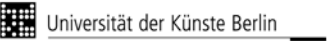
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**DROPPING IN
AND OUT
INTERROGATE
THE SILENT
PLACES
FEMALE
SOLIDARITY AND
ACADEMIC
CHALLENGES**

SOLID AC CHA

