

With a Majority-Female 2022 Edition, the Venice Biennale Will Make History for Women Artists

BY MAURA REILLY

February 10, 2022 3:43pm

Since it started in 1895, the Venice Biennale has been an every-other-year barometer of the global art world. As such, the release of its artist list with each iteration provides not only a glimpse into which artistic styles might be coming to the fore, but also more recently has prompted a discussion about the demographics of those artists. Cecilia Alemani, artistic director of the 2022 edition of the Biennale, which is set to open in April, released her artist list last week, and the statistics, with regard to non-male and female-identifying artists are highly encouraging if not historic: Of the 213 artists in the Biennale, just 21 artists—or just under ten percent—are (or, in the case of the deceased, were) male-identifying. Of those male artists, just 15 are living. To put this into context: there has never even been, in the history of the Biennale’s curated exhibition, an edition that is majority-female. At one extreme, in 1995, the exhibition as curated by Jean Clair was 90 percent male. Even some of the more recent editions curated by women have been majority-male, such as Christine Macel’s in 2017 and Bice Curiger’s in 2011. In fact, the only such large institutional group shows *anywhere* that have a larger proportion of women artists than Alemani’s are likely to be museum shows explicitly devoted to female artists (2017’s “Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960–1985,” for instance, or 2007’s “WACK!: Art and the Feminist Revolution,” or my own exhibition of the same year, “Global Feminisms,” co-curated with Linda Nochlin).

That Alemani's exhibition swings the pendulum so far in favor of non-male-identifying artists (a handful are, or were, nonbinary) is something she is wearing lightly. She has not pegged this an overtly feminist Biennale but has instead been relatively subtle in her framing of it. In her curator's essay and in interviews, she speaks of wanting to challenge the "universal ideal of the white, male 'Man of Reason' as fixed center of the universe and measure of all things." She speaks of an interest in historical narratives that are built around "forms of symbiosis, solidarity, and sisterhood" rather than "systems of direct inheritance and conflict," which are assumed male. She has titled her Biennale "The Milk of Dreams" after a book of the same name by Surrealist Leonora Carrington, and in her curator's essay, she invokes feminist theorist and activist Silvia Federici and sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin. But aside from this, there is no drum-beating; instead, Alemani has baked a feminist perspective into the show itself: the first artwork viewers will see as they enter the show will be a work by Belkis Ayón that describes an imaginary matriarchal society drawn from Afro-Cuban traditions.

This kind of framing is important. Despite major leaps in recent decades, for the majority of its history, exhibition making has been a male endeavor. And sexism remains omnipresent in the art world, in various forms. In 2018, I published a book called *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* in which I examined art world statistics in detail. I defined curatorial activism as "the practice of organizing art exhibitions with the principal aim of ensuring that large constituencies of artists are no longer ghettoized or excluded from the master narratives of art." I made the distinction that curatorial activists are not practicing Affirmative Action curating, but instead are practicing "intelligent curating... a practice rooted in ethics" and that their exhibitions "function as *curatorial correctives* to the exclusion of Other artists from either the master narratives of art history and the contemporary art scene itself." One could argue that the end goal of curatorial activism is that such curating becomes normalized; Alemani's Biennale is a step in that direction.

For Alemani to curate a major international exhibition, arguably the most important one in the world, to be majority-female is, despite her subtlety, an overtly feminist and curatorial activist gesture—and it is a much-needed turning of the tables. It *is* a curatorial corrective to centuries of erasure of women from art history. And it's not

just market darlings on view; there are many female artists who've never before shown on the international stage, and many of the deceased female artists on Alemani's roster have had far less recognition than the living ones. Major historical women artists are included in order to, as Alemani puts it, "trace kinships and affinities" across generations of women. In Alemani's mind, it is women artists, historically and now, who have offered up possible solutions during dark and confusing times—or as she explains, these artists are imagining "new modes of co-existence and infinite new possibilities of transformation."

I hope this Biennale will set a precedent for other large-scale exhibitions, much like Okwui Enwezor's 2011 edition of Documenta, which was the first (and last, to date) to employ a postcolonial curatorial strategy. (Although this year's edition of Documenta, curated by the artist collective ruangrupa, is looking promising in that regard too.) This is not to say that I believe all exhibitions should be majority-female (although, to be honest, I would not mind such a swinging of the pendulum for a period of time; that is, until equality is within reach). What I mean is that it would be amazing if other curators were courageous enough to follow Alemani's lead and use the platform of global Biennales not only to give voice to those who have been historically silenced, which inevitably is women, non-white, and queer artists, but to show it in the numbers. This is the only way to truly offer up new narratives of art history and rewrite it to tell stories untold.

Maura Reilly is a curator, nonprofit leader, and the author of Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating. She was recently appointed director of the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University.