
DIMENSIONS OF REALITY: FEMALE MINIMAL

GROUP EXHIBITION

PARIS PANTIN

05 Jun 2020 - 25 Jul 2020



The gallery has taken careful measures to ensure the safety of all visitors and staff in accordance with governmental guidelines. It is with great pleasure that we now invite visitors to experience the displays first hand.

With works by Feliza Bursztyn, Rosemarie Castoro, Maria Lai, Liliane Lijn, Verena Loewensberg, Mary Miss, Kazuko Miyamoto, Lucia Moholy, Vera Molnar, Marlow Moss, Lydia Okumura, Lolo Soldevilla, Magdalena Wiecek, Shizuko Yoshikawa.

Curated by Anke Kempkes & Pierre-Henri Foulon.

This exhibition brings together fourteen pioneering women artists from Europe and the Americas, who each contributed in their original and uncompromising way to expanding the scope of the minimal aesthetics beyond the orthodox category of Minimal Art. Through a large selection of sculptures, installations, paintings and works on paper dating from the 1920s to the early 1980s, *Dimensions of Reality: Female Minimal* explores new perspectives and genealogies in the field of geometric abstraction, highlighting the complex and often subtle relationships between formalism and identity politics.

The artists in the show have been central to period-defining artists' groups such as Zurich Concrete in Switzerland, Abstraction-Création in Paris and Los Diez Pintores Concretos in Cuba, and have co-founded some of the most experimental artistic platforms of their time, such as A.I.R. Gallery in New York and the Biennial of Spatial Forms in Poland. However, most of them have long been overlooked and their role is only now receiving greater recognition.

Abstract experimentations of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s form the core of the exhibition. Beyond the plurality of cultural and geographical contexts within which each of these artists evolved — which partly explain the variety of forms gathered here — these artists are united by their emancipatory desire to expand and disrupt the canon being forged by a male-dominated minimal vocabulary.

Reconstructed especially for the exhibition, a monumental wall painting by Japanese-Brazilian artist Lydia Okumura (b.1948, São Paulo; lives and works in New York), first realised in Colombia for the Medellín Biennial in 1981, will distort and reconfigure the surrounding space. Presented for the first time since 1978, *Forest of Threes*, a large installation by Rosemarie Castoro (1939 – 2015, New York) connects dance with an abstract forest. Shown for the first time in France, the work of Shizuko Yoshikawa (1934, Omūta, Japan – 2019, Zurich) is the result of a unique fusion between Swiss Concretism and Japanese Zen principles. A selection of metal sculptures by Polish pioneer Magdalena Wiecek (1924, Katowice, Poland – 2008, Egypt) demonstrates her crucial role in the history of Eastern European neo avant-garde, initiating collaborations with factory workers. Also working with metal, Feliza Bursztyn (1933, Bogota – 1982, Paris) was part of a generation of Latin American artists that infused formalist sculpture experimentation with political underpinning. Represented by a large outdoor installation and early sculptures from the late 1960s, the work of Mary Miss (b. 1944, New York; lives and works in New York) was at the center of the critical reception of Minimal Art although she became later known for her postmodern urban structures and environments. The radical work of Vera Molnar (b. 1924, Budapest; lives and works in Paris) demonstrates her creativity within a predetermined system of rules, establishing fertile ground for further intersections between art and technology. One of the four co-

founders of the Zurich Concrete group, Verena Loewensberg (1912 – 1986, Zurich) deliberately incorporated irregular shapes that challenged the balance of her painted compositions. In the same spirit, but a different way, Kazuko Miyamoto (b. 1942, Tokyo; lives and works in New York) introduced an element of imprecision to the minimal grid. Isolating herself from the dominant artistic movements of her time, Sardinian artist Maria Lai (1919 – 2013, Sardinia) combined the vernacular technique of weaving with constructivist elements, deeply engaging with her immediate community. Similarly, Lolo Soldevilla (1901 – 1971, Havana) pursued visual innovations in the Cuban 1950s Concretist movement while maintaining politically engaged writing activities. Liliane Lijn (b. 1939, New York; lives and works in London) pioneered Kinetic Art and Concrete poetry in the 1960s by introducing elements of texts and numeric systems into abstract rotating sculptures.

These artists were preceded by numerous groundbreaking female figures of the pre-war avant-garde movements, from Bauhaus to Neo-Plasticism, which have predominantly been documented through the accomplishments of male masters. The seminal Bauhaus photographer Lucia Moholy (1894, Prague – 1989, Zurich) exemplifies the ways in which the contributions of female forerunners were overlooked or even co-opted. The famed school's outstanding documentarist, Moholy fought to regain the rights to her oeuvre for decades after Walter Gropius took her negatives to the US in the 1930s as part of the anonymous Bauhaus archive. British artist Marlow Moss (1889, Kilburn, UK – 1958, Penzance, UK) has played a central role in the development of Neo-Plasticism. Based on a detailed mathematical theory, she introduced in her rigorous compositions the "double line", a dynamizing feature that has been later adopted by Piet Mondrian without crediting her. Her legacy has been further diminished by the almost complete destruction of her work from the 1930s during World War II when she was forced to escape Nazi occupation in France.

Gender and sexuality — though often seemingly external to the abstract aesthetic — had numerous real-life manifestations for the exhibited artists, who at times brought a feminist perspective into their works. Feliza Bursztyn, who studied at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, with Ossip Zadkine in the 1950s, invested Kinetic Art with oppositional feminist and leftist agendas, fighting against oppressive social and political conditions in Colombia. Rosemarie Castoro was part of New York's legendary Art Workers' Coalition in 1969, and one of the eight women interviewed in Linda Nochlin's 1971 groundbreaking essay, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' Kazuko Miyamoto, Sol Lewitt's first assistant, co-founded A.I.R. (Artist in Residence) in 1972, the first all-female collective art gallery in New York. Eschewing traditionally feminine attributes, Marlow Moss changed her forename from Marjorie and adopted a dandified masculine appearance around 1919.

The 'emancipatory' aspect of minimalism is furthered in this exhibition through the recognition of new geographies when mapping Minimal Art, which has traditionally been understood as a movement predominantly associated with the United States. This exhibition will look beyond this paradigm to examine Eastern European and Latin American practices, and the oppositional stances these artists took within their specific socio-political milieus. The personal trajectories of the artists presented demonstrate how stories of migration and dynamics of international exchange have been a consistent driver of innovation and creativity.

About the artists

Feliza Bursztyn

(1933, Bogotá, Colombia – 1982, Paris, France)

Born in Colombia to Polish Jewish immigrants, the prosperity of Feliza Bursztyn's family textile factory enabled her to study at the Art Students League in New York, then at the Académie Grande Chaumière in Paris with Cubist sculptor Ossip Zadkine. In 1960, she converted the factory garage into her own studio, which became a gathering place for many writers, artists, and intellectuals. She started to experiment with scrap metal for her *Chatarras* (Junk) sculptures, compositions of rusted and ruined mechanical fragments that become allegories for the dark side of Colombia's aggressive modernisation. Her subsequent kinetic sculptures *Histéricas* (Hysterics) incorporated a feminist reading into the formalist genre.

Rosemarie Castoro

(1939 – 2015, New York, New York, USA)

Rosemarie Castoro was a key figure of the 1960s and 1970s Minimal and Conceptual Art scene in New York. After experimenting with colour in all-over painted compositions, she introduced a new spatial element into her work with freestanding, multi-panelled works in monochrome gesso and graphite. In *Eight Corners* (1971), she adds a layer of illusion to the architectural scale of the installation through the play of shadows. In the late 1970s, she started making installations using carved wood. The sequential, number-based, minimalist structure of *Forest of Threes* (1977–78) simultaneously carries a highly sensual, surreal and allegorical dimension.

Maria Lai

(1919, Ulassai, Italy – 2013, Cardedu, Italy)

Born in a small village in Sardinia, Maria Lai developed an artistic approach informed by the folkloric tradition of her native region, tracing her own path along the margins of informal art and geometric abstraction. In 1971, she started her cycle of *Telai* (Looms), creating sculptures in which painting and weaving intertwined. In 1981, when asked to create a war memorial, she proposed instead a 'monument for the living': *Legarsi alla montagna* (To Tie Oneself to the Mountain). She linked together the entire village with a blue ribbon tied from house to house, all the way up to the top of mountain, as in an ancient folk tale.

Liliane Lijn

(b. 1939, New York, New York, USA; lives and works in London, UK)

Working in Paris in the early sixties before moving to London in 1966, Liliane Lijn was one of the first artists to introduce kinetic text into her work. Lijn is recognised for her pioneering interconnection of the arts, science and technology, together with Eastern philosophy and female mythology. In 1962 she invented her first *Poem Machines*, incorporating rotating movement and text, which later developed into cone-shaped *Koans*.

Verena Loewensberg

(1912 – 1986, Zürich, Switzerland)

Verena Loewensberg studied weaving, embroidery and colour theory at the Basel School of Design before becoming a textile designer in the early 1930s. Between 1934 and 1936 she visited Paris several times, often accompanied by Max Bill who introduced her to the artists of the group Abstraction-Création. After the war, she became known as the only female member of the small Zürich Concrete circle ". Passionate about music, especially jazz, she ran a record store from 1964 to 1970. Although her work is fundamentally formalist in nature, it is also imbued with great freedom, poetry and musicality.

Mary Miss

(b. 1944, New York, New York, USA; lives and works in New York, New York, USA)

The American artist Mary Miss is a pioneer in Minimal, environmental and site-specific art, and was also a founding member of the journal *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* (1977–1993). Since the 1960s, Miss has created interior and outdoor installations using the simplest materials: wood, wire, rope, plastic, canvas and glass, inspired by structures on industrial sites. Her large-scale urban projects, developed from the late 1970s onwards, emphasise each site's history, sociology and ecology – such as *South Cove* (1984–87), a permanent public project in Battery Park, New York.

Kazuko Miyamoto

(b. 1942, Tokyo, Japan; lives and works in New York, New York, USA)

Kazuko Miyamoto has been a major figure of the Minimal and post-Minimal art scene in New York. She studied art in Tokyo before moving to New York, where she attended the Art Students League from 1964 to 1968. In 1968, she moved into a studio in the same building as Sol LeWitt and became his first assistant, alongside her own practice. Her paintings (1968–72), modular sculptures (1972–75) and string installations (1972–78) use an abstract geometric language, adopting grids and modules as recurring motifs while inserting subtle and ironic commentary on the confident masculinity of Minimal Art. In 1972 she co-founded A.I.R (Artist in Residence), the first all-female collective established in New York.

Lucia Moholy

(1894, Prague, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now Czech Republic) – 1989, Zürich, Switzerland)

After studying philosophy and philology, Lucia Moholy worked in publishing before moving with her husband László Moholy-Nagy to the Bauhaus in Weimar, where she enrolled in the photography class. She introduced Moholy-Nagy to photography and together they created their first photograms. She documented the Bauhaus' move to Dessau and its new headquarters by taking a vast number of pictures. She later established a photography studio in Berlin but fled to Paris during the war in 1933, forced to leave behind all of her photographs and archives. Art history has long kept her in the shadow of her husband: war and the transfer of part of the school's archives to the United States by Walter Gropius has contributed to the subsequent erasure of her authorship.

Vera Molnár

(b. 1924, Budapest, Hungary; lives and works in Paris, France)

Traditionally trained in Budapest, Vera Molnár moved to Paris in 1947 where she invented an avant-garde artistic process of systematically generating geometric images. This series of exploratory steps and rules dictated the final, hand-drawn form of her work. Repetitions and variations of the letter M (as in Malevich or Mondrian) are frequent in her early work. These variations in the positions of the letter-signs give language an enigmatic density. From 1968 onwards, she began creating computer-generated images and algorithmic paintings.

Marlow Moss

(1889, Kilburn, UK – 1958, Penzance, UK)

British Constructivist artist Marlow Moss permanently adopted a masculine, dandified appearance and changed her forename from Marjorie to the gender-neutral 'Marlow' in 1919. She moved to Paris in 1927 where she met her lifelong partner, the Dutch writer Antoinette Hendrika Nijhoff-Wind. Moss studied with Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant at the Académie Moderne, but her style was particularly influenced by Piet Mondrian. In contrast to Mondrian, Moss theorised her Neo-Plasticist drawings and paintings on the basis of complex mathematical principles. She was a founding member of Abstraction-Création and exhibited with the Salon des Surindépendants. In World War II she fled from France to Cornwall, where she remained until her death.

Lydia Okumura

(b. 1948, São Paulo, Brazil; lives and works in New York, New York, USA)

Born in São Paulo to a Japanese family, Okumura's interest in art was awakened by her father, a calligrapher. In the 1970s, influenced by new movements in Japan and America, she initiated the first Conceptual Art show in Brazil with fellow students at the Museum of Contemporary Art, São Paulo. After moving to New York in 1974, Okumura collaborated with Sol LeWitt and began developing her 'Situations', site-specific geometric installations composed from colour fields and string that project into space from the walls and floor, exploring the optical interplay between two and three-dimensional structures.

Loló Soldevilla

(1901 – 1971, Havana, Cuba)

Loló Soldevilla was a pioneer of Cuban Abstraction in the 1950s and one of the founders of the group *Los Diez Pintores Concretos* (The Ten Concrete Painters), together with her husband Pedro de Oraá. A political activist and writer since the 1930s, she travelled to Paris in 1949 where she enrolled in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and began developing works influenced by the European avant-garde. Upon her return to Cuba she founded Galeria Color-Luz, an artistic space focused on the promotion of abstraction.

Magdalena Więcek

(1924, Katowice, Poland – 2008, Egypt)

One of the most influential abstract sculptors in post-war Poland, Magdalena Więcek primarily experimented with the potential of metal as an artistic material. She collaborated with factory workers to create her large-scale outdoor installations as well as smaller compositions, all characterised by a strong sense of movement and dynamism. In 1965, she co-founded the Biennial of Spatial Forms in Elbląg, Northern Poland, which became a key event for the development of a modernist conception of sculpture in the Eastern Bloc.

Shizuko Yoshikawa

(1934, Omūta, Japan – 2019, Zürich, Switzerland)

Shizuko Yoshikawa was the first female Japanese student at the Ulm School of Design in 1961. She began her career as a graphic designer in Zürich, marrying Swiss graphic designer Joseph Müller-Brockmann in 1967. In the mid-1970s, she started to create coloured reliefs in painted wood. She later distanced herself from the Concretist use of strong colour hues and instead limited her colours to extremely light tonalities, applying them only to the outlines of the relief.