FEMINIST CLIMATE CHANGE: BEYOND THE BINARY AND ACROSS GENERA

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This essay reflects on the 2017 exhibition Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary, co-curated for Ars Electronica, as a lens through which to explore the entangled crises of gender, ecology, and technology. Anchored in personal narrative and historical analysis, it centres the story of Iranian designer Maryam Razi, whose trajectory – from transnational creative collaborator to climate-displaced artist – mirrors the escalating precarity faced by women worldwide. Set against the backdrop of the #MeToo movement, Greta Thunberg's rise, and Ars Electronica's own internal reckoning with gender bias, the essay situates the exhibition as both a critical intervention and a generative archive of feminist, intersectional climate justice. Drawing on ecofeminist scholarship and the work of some of the participating artists, it calls for a reimagining of institutional and ecological systems rooted in care, interdependence, and radical transformation. With the selected works, we aim to converge the issues in feminism with environmentalism. By framing the exhibition in this way, it was our hope to reinvigorate the eco-feminism that emerged in the 70s and was ignored for much too long. In this particular context, at the Ars Electronica festival in Linz, we address the local and transnational issues of feminism in media arts and the global issue of climate change – thus the very obvious title.

Introduction: Reimagining Feminist Climate Futures

The Feminist Climate Change: *Beyond the Binary* exhibition, which I co-curated with Xin Xin for Ars Electronica in 2017, emphasised that feminism is not exclusively about women; rather, it advocated for the dismantling of all systems of inequality, inviting participation from all genders, including men, non-binary, and gender-diverse individuals. The exhibition underscored that feminism is about challenging and transforming power structures that have traditionally marginalised not only women but also other underrepresented communities and the environment.

At the time, this perspective felt urgent but also full of potential. There was a sense that emerging generations of artists, scientists, and activists could still intervene in the course of climate destruction and systemic inequality. The conversations fostered through the exhibition – between disciplines, across borders, and among identities – reflected a kind of feminist futurism grounded in care, interconnection, and resistance.

Maryam Razi and the Art Sci Collective

It was during this moment that Maryam Razi, a young Iranian designer, walked into the center and became deeply engaged with this project. Maryam embodied the very spirit of transnational feminist energy that the *Beyond the Binary* exhibition aimed to cultivate. She moved between Tehran and Los Angeles, contributing innovative work and insights that wove together cultural memory, technology, and ecological thinking. In 2017, Tehran's creative community was thriving despite underlying tensions. Maryam represented the powerful and poetic vision of what a feminist future could look like – global, experimental, and inclusive.

But that vision has become increasingly difficult to hold onto. In the years since, Maryam – like many Iranian women – has found herself unable to return home. The intensification of state surveillance, the repression of free expression, and the targeting of women who dare to speak, create, or move freely has made it unsafe. Meanwhile, in the United States, the reversal of reproductive rights with the 2022 Supreme Court ruling, marked a devastating regression. Young women today are coming of age with fewer protections than the generations before them. The illusion that democratic nations are inherently progressive on women's rights has been shattered.

An Exhibition Rooted in Urgency and Solidarity

The Feminist Climate Change exhibition showcased a vibrant constellation of artists and scientists whose works interrogated climate change, gender, and power through a feminist, anti-binary lens. The lineup was made up mostly of UCLA's *Art Sci Collective*: featuring Pinar Yoldas, Silvia Rigon, Mary Maggic Tsang, Xin Xin, Noa P. Kaplan, Sanglim Han, Sarah Brady and Jen Agosta; *The Design Media Arts* alumni with additional invited artists: Erika Blumenfeld, Nancy Baker Cahill, Inhye Lee, Fabiola

Menchelli, Bahareh Khoshooee, Angelina Oleksy-Wawrzyniak, Nandita Kumar, Eunice Luk, Yaloo and the collective *voidLab*. Young feminist-aligned scientists including Christina Agapakis, Olivia Osborne and Rita Blaik also contributed.

The exhibition was intergenerational, celebrating students, recent graduates, emerging artists, scientists, and educators alike. It was also a deeply personal moment for me: my younger daughter, Aleksa Mara, joined us during the installation. Seeing her engage hands-on with the labour of building this space for imagination and resistance made tangible the intergenerational urgency of feminist climate action. Her participation echoed the exhibition's core message – that change is collaborative, that it crosses generational and gendered lines, and that the future depends on how we nurture these connections now.

Cultural Flashpoints: #MeToo, Greta and Institutional Critique

The exhibition unfolded in 2017 – a year of seismic shifts around gender and power. As we installed *Feminist Climate Change* in Linz, the *#MeToo* movement erupted globally, revealing the pervasive scale of gender-based violence. At the same time, Greta Thunberg began her solitary climate strike in Sweden, a quiet act that soon sparked a global youth movement. Both were led by young women. Both exposed the violence of systems - whether against bodies or the planet - and insisted on radical change.

These movements echoed the core ethos of the exhibition: that dismantling systems of domination requires confronting both the exploitation of bodies and the extraction of Earth's resources. The timing was not incidental. Feminist Climate Change, as articulated through the artists' works, was a lived, urgent response to these intersecting crises.

Responding to Critique: Ars Electronicas' Evolution

The tensions addressed in the exhibition were not only directed outward. Ars Electronica itself was facing growing criticism for its lack of gender equity - particularly in its prestigious Golden Nica awards, which had historically favored male recipients. The *Kiss My Ars* campaign, initiated by artist Heather Dewey-Hagborg, brought this disparity to public attention. At the same time, Christa Sommerer, in charge of the campus exhibitions extended an invitation for me to curate the annual Campus exhibition, a platform typically reserved for showcasing the technological innovation of international academic institutions. Christa Sommerer is the director of *Interface Cultures* at the University of Linz. I agreed – on the condition that we could confront these institutional issues openly. From this exchange emerged *Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary*, a project that reflected the festival's willingness to engage with critique and begin addressing its own structural biases.

As an extension of the exhibition, we co-organised a symposium with Ars Electronica titled with the same name, held on September 9, 2017, at the *OÖ Kulturquartier* in Linz. The panel brought together artists, theorists, scientists, and curators to explore intersections of feminism, ecology, and technology. It opened with *From C to X: Networked Feminisms*, a session featuring Virginia Barratt, Alla Mitrofanova, and Annie Goh, moderated by Diana McCarty. This session traced the lineage from cyberfeminism to xenofeminism. This was followed by *Emerging Voices*, with participants including A.M. Darke, Kate Hollenbach, Mary Maggic, Silvia Rigon, Echo Theohar, and Christina Yglesias, moderated by Xin Xin of *voidLab*. Another panel, *Feminism and the Sciences / Environmentalism*, featured Rita Blaik, Olivia Osborne, Byron Rich, and Silvia Rigon, moderated by James Gimzewski. The final discussion, *Practices and Initiatives*, brought together an international cohort including Diana Arellano, David Familian, Ine Gevers, Satinder P. Gill, Waltraud Grausgruber, Beatrix Hausner, Haytham Nawar, Genoveva Rückert-Sommerauer, Elisabeth Schimana, Rosa von Suess and Eveline Wandl-Vogt, and was moderated by me. The discussions were vibrant, unapologetic, and transformative. At the same time, Ars Electronica began building an archive of women artists working with technology – *Women in Media Arts* – a meaningful step toward institutional repair. This process affirmed that feminist critique, when met with humility, can lead to real structural change.

Feminist Ecologies: Highlighted Works and Practices

Artists such as Pinar Yoldas, Mary Maggic, Xin Xin, Scott Hessels, and John Brumley – all part of the *Art Sci Collective* – contributed works that exemplified the exhibition's interdisciplinary and activist ethos. Yoldas envisioned speculative ecosystems shaped by microplastic contamination. Maggic's estrogen hacking workshops revealed how hormonal regulation, surveillance, and environmental toxicity are entangled. Xin Xin blurred digital design with feminist accountability. Hessels translated environmental data into poetic media, while Brumley's open-source tools promoted access and transparency. Their works created a network of resistance and reimagination. They offered not just critique, but proposals for how art, science, and feminism could work together to forge livable futures.

Cycles of Suppression and Resistance: A Historical Perspective

The feminist climate movement is not new. Its roots stretch back to the ecofeminist theories of Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, Maria Mies, and Silvia Federici. Merchant's *The Death of Nature* traced how science reshaped Earth into a passive machine. Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* revealed how witch hunts disciplined women's bodies to serve capitalist accumulation. Shiva famously wrote, "What we do to nature, we do to ourselves."The work in *Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary* is part of a this longer arc – one that stretches across decades, geographies, and

generations. The roots of ecofeminism, emerging in the 1970s through thinkers like Vandana Shiva, Carolyn Merchant, and Maria Mies, made explicit the links between the domination of women and the domination of nature. They argued that the logic of patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism depended on a binary worldview – one that separated reason from emotion, human from nature, masculine from feminine – and that this false dualism justified violence against both bodies and ecosystems.

Merchant's *The Death of Nature* traced how the Scientific Revolution replaced a living, organic view of the world with a mechanical one, relegating the Earth to a passive resource to be controlled. Silvia Federici, in *Caliban and the Witch*, showed how the witch hunts of early modern Europe were part of a larger campaign to discipline women's bodies in the service of capital accumulation – a campaign that, arguably, never ended. These histories remind us that the current rollback of rights and the environmental collapse we are witnessing today are not aberrations – they are the continuation of a long, cyclical pattern of suppression and resistance. These scholars help us see today's crises – from Roe v. Wade's reversal to climate catastrophe - as part of a long, recurring pattern of domination. But just as these patterns persist, so too do resistance and renewal.

Loss and Legacy: Maryam's Story and the Fires of 2025

Maryam's story, too, is part of this lineage. Her journey – from an active participant in the *Art Sci* community to a displaced artist navigating the tightening restrictions of the Iranian regime – reflects both the vulnerability and the resilience of young women today. But her struggle did not end with exile. In early 2025, Maryam lost everything in the catastrophic wildfires that swept through Pacific Palisades in Los Angeles and swept through her neighborhood, erasing her home, her studio and her archives. What she escaped politically, she could not escape ecologically.

Her loss is not isolated. It is emblematic of the entangled crises of our time: the climate emergency no longer looms as a distant threat – it arrives suddenly, on wind and flame, and takes without warning. And it arrives most violently for those already precariously positioned. Maryam's life has been shaped by the convergence of geopolitical borders and planetary boundaries, both of which have become increasingly unforgiving. And yet, she continues to create, to speak, to resist.

Her voice, like those of the artists in *Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary*, reminds us that the fight for gender equity and ecological survival is not abstract. It is ongoing, recursive, and deeply embodied. These losses are personal. This work is urgent.

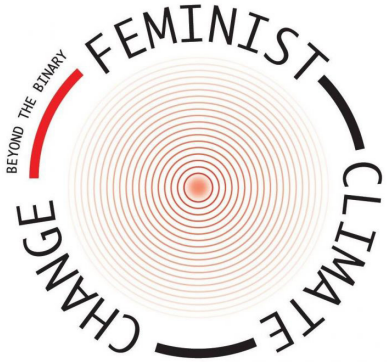

Figure 1: *Vexation.* Hui, P. (2017). Musical instrument.

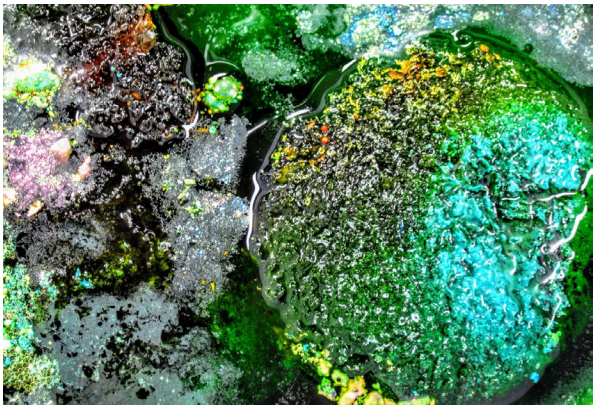

Figure 2: *Meltings of the Heart Change Glacial Landscapes.* Osborne, O. (2017). Chemicals, coloured dyes, paint.

Some artists in the exhibition:

Vexation by Phoebe Hui (HK)

Vexation is a musical instrument built especially to play Erik Satie's composition *Vexation.* Satie apparently instructed that the same music should be played 840 times. Inspired by Samuel Biderman's octave spinet, *Vexation* builds upon traditional drawing pencils and woodwork together with modern electronics. I made a moving wooden cylinder on which I drew marks using pencils with different-sized leads. These pencil marks function as a score. The contact between the sound circuit and the pencil marks produces audible music. The cylinder can also be seen as a sculptural piece. Its cylindrical shape evokes my understanding of vexation – an endless circulation. In *Vexation*, I tried to collapse score and performance: The drawing in itself is the physical material that generates the tone. I am interested in transforming existing artworks, presenting them using new forms of notation or mechanical instruments, in order to raise the question: When does something become a different work of art?

http://www.earthlinginger.com

Meltings of the Heart Change Glacial Landscapes by Olivia Osborne (UK)

The ice domes represent both the environment in the form of glaciers and their defenselessness against climate change. In addition, they also represent the vulnerability of "frozen" human hearts, susceptible to melting. The salt symbolises the action of a xenobiotic tainting the environment. In the heart, it represents a powerful, evocative emotion that penetrates the organ, both through a chemical reaction. When this occurs, it leaves a tainted colour that is forever encapsulated within the environment and the heart, "trapped." The water that surges in and out represents the people who enter and leave our lives, both in the environment and in our hearts. Only a few powerful individuals or chemicals have the capacity to make an impression – or "love" – in this landscape. Their touch upon the impressionable, delicate emotions and susceptible landscapes remains there permanently, hybridising one another, interconnecting. These actions are represented by hydrophobic coloured dyes and paint.

https://oliviaosborne5.wixsite.com/oliviaosborneart/art-work

Figure 3: *Cyborg Portrait.* Kaplan, N. (2017). Video.

Figure 5: *Believe Campaign.* Tomorrow Girls' Troop. (2017). Performance.

Cyborg Portrait by Noa Kaplan (US)

Why do the female cyborgs defy the pattern? Using the four mysterious characters from the US television series Westworld as a starting point, I began an obsessive process of de-interlacing their narratives - by capturing and recutting each character's story arc so that I could watch each uninterrupted.

https://www.noapkaplan.com

Figure 4: *Believe Campaign.* Tomorrow Girls' Troop. (2017). Performance.

Troop (JP/KR)

The Believe Campaign was launched to raise awareness of sexual violence in Japan and to demand modernisation of the penal law, which has not been modified since its establishment in 1907. The *Tomorrow Girls' Troop* contributed the design elements, targeting women in their 20s, and staged the art performance *Believe March* to demonstrate the public's demand for the amendments. Participants wore feather-shaped masks to maintain anonymity, with messages of support. The march was filmed and premiered in 2017 in Tokyo as part of a group show on socially engaged art (Figure 4 and 5).

https://tomorrowgirlstroop.com

Figure 6: *Compliant Gait.* Brumley, J. (2017). Installation with social media.

Figure 7: *Drones Sweet Drones.* Niemetz, A. (2017). Embroidered blueprints using Arduino-powered lights.

Compliant Gait by Sharmi Basu (US) and John Brumley (US)

Digital bodies are constructed through the various gestures, data and objects we release into virtual space. Our own digital labours maintain such beings, and it is only through constant engagement with social media that the elusive memories of our own selves momentarily breach into the feeds of our followers and friends. As such, the corporate filters imposed by the apps that support and display our patchwork bodies partially imbue our digital selves with branding via watermarks, limited distribution, and licensing. In *Compliant Gait*, an invisible creature is given temporary form through the labour of an audience. After connecting to a local wireless network, audience members can use their mobile phones to instantiate digital objects within the hull of the creature. One by one, these objects fill the hollow shape of the creature's body, revealing its form as it moves with a compliant gait across a barren landscape.

https://www.sharmi.info/recent-upcoming

Drones Sweet Drones by Anne Niemetz (NZ)

Home Sweet Home was an expression that was popular with troops on both sides of the American civil war, and through the glorification of drones, the installation aims to open up discussion about the uses of drone technology. As embroidered blueprints using Arduino-powered lights, the aesthetic of the drones combines techniques associated with the past and the future, art and science, the amateur and the professional, and the feminine and the masculine. The blueprint text prompts us to further consider the potential of drones, as well as the gendered logics under which they operate. *Drones Sweet Drones* is purposely conspicuous rather than stealthy. Turning surveillance on its head, it wants us to study the fly on the wall that is becoming a greater part of our lives.

https://adime.de/

Figure 8: *Molecular Queering.* Tsang, M.M. and Rich, B. (2017).

Figure 9: *TyndallLandscapes.* Blaik, R. (2017).

Molecular Queering by Mary Maggic Tsang (US), Byron Rich (CA)

Bodies queer in many ways, most actively through the molecular colonisation of our planet. Thanks to petrochemical, agricultural and pharmaceutical industries (markers of our anthropogenic time), these queering molecules are hormonally active and bio-politically pervasive as a state of toxicity. Our bodies and bodies of non-human species are all undergoing a collective mutagenesis – our kin are both the intersex frogs as well as the gender-bending chemicals in their bloodstream. So what does it mean to identify with our chemically induced world? To create discourse that turns toxic shame into toxic embrace? Am I not only inheriting the genomes of my parents but also the plastic molecules my mother is exposed to as I incubate in her womb? It is with this queering power of xeno-biochemicals that the *Molecular Queering* workshop performs a urine hormone extraction and analysis, a DIY/DIWO recipe for gender-hacking. Bring your own urine!

https://maggic.ooo/About
https://byronrich.com

TyndallLandscapes by Rita Blaik (US)

TyndallLandscapes is the creation of artificial skyscape sculptures utilising nanoparticles as the primary means of scattering light. These sunsets invite the viewers to contemplate as one might contemplate an actual sunset. They are also presented with the concentration of the nanoparticles used to create the "sunset" and show the analogous, parts-per-million concentrations of highly polluted cities where particulate concentrations are so high as to cause serious health complications. The emergence of nanoparticles as a technology so promising for technological and societal advance, also comes with negative effects on our health and the environment. These are difficult to study due to the size-specific effects and traits of nanomaterials.

https://ritablaik.com

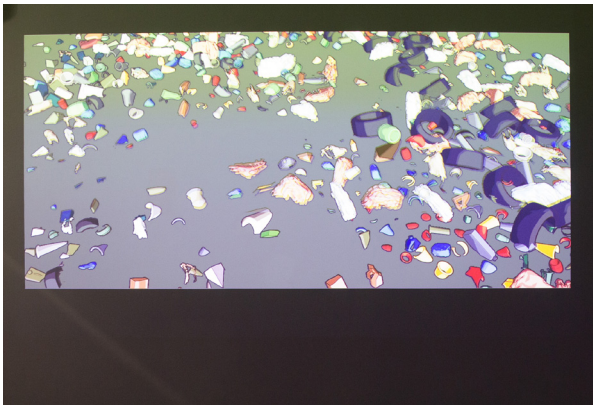

Figure 10: *Panta Rei (Everything Flows).* Rigon, S. (2017). Video.

Figure 11: *Prologue.* Xin, X. (2017). Video.

Panta Rei (Everything Flows) by Silvia Rigon (IT)

Inspired by real media news events, *Panta Rei* is a socio-political commentary on the desensitising effects of the media, but also a metaphor of the passage we are facing epochally, with water at the center of the struggle for sustainability and survival, and the choices we make – or fail to make.

http://www.silviarigon.com/#/pantarei/

Prologue by Xin Xin (US/TW)

Prologue questions whether the decentralisation of surveillance software tools, created by governments, corporations and institutions to manipulate our relationship with politics, can undermine the individual's sense of responsibility toward themselves and others. It also questions whether sovereignty can possibly be achieved without centralised protocols.

https://www.newschool.edu/parsons/faculty/xin-xin/

Figure 12 and 13: Images fron the exhibition, *Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary.* (2017). Ars Electronica, Austria.

Other Artists in the show included:

Extreme Environments Arts-Based Field Research by Scott Hessels (US)
Dirt by Christina Agapakis (US), Ellie Harmon (US)
Cyborg Portrait by Noa Kaplan (US)
Xerodrome by Christopher O'Leary (US)
Fog Light by Doug Smarch (CA)
Light Echoes by Aaron Koblin (US)
The Antmaster by Ben Tricklebank (US), Gil Kuno (US/JP)
Oh Dear Me (Documentation) by Knifeandfork (US)
Follower by Lauren McCarthy (US)
In Passing by A.M. Darke (US)
Shapeshifting VoidLab by Nora Khan (US), Sarah Brady (US), Sanglim Han (KR), Jen Agosta (US)
Shadow Glass by *VoidLab* by Jen Agosta (US), Sanglim Han (KR), Xin Xin (US/TW)

All Photos: Tom Mesic.

Conclusion of the exhibition:

Feminist Climate Change as Living Archive

What *Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary* offered in 2017- and what it continues to offer today - is a vision of solidarity that crosses binaries and borders. It reminds us that care is strength, that the feminine is a force of resistance, and that the future is neither gender-neutral nor politically inevitable.

As we face worsening climate and political conditions, we must return to the lessons of this exhibition - not as nostalgia, but as blueprints. The stories we tell, the networks we build, and the art we make are tools of survival. This is not just history. It is a living archive.

Figure 14: Artists in the exhibition.
Feminist Climate Change: Beyond the Binary (2017). Ars Electronica, Austria.
Photo: Tom Mesic.

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