Over the last decade, as the disputes surrounding socially engaged art have been historicized, the repercussions of the 2008 financial crisis have hit, and the global circuitry of biennials and art fairs has peaked, not to mention the crises brought on by Black Lives Matter, far right nationalisms, and now a global pandemic, there has been a renewed urgency regarding the relevance—and precarity—of art history as a discipline (Grant and Price 2020, Joselit 2020, Petrovich 2020, Mirzoeff 2020, Bishop 2020). Like art history, feminism, too, finds itself at a crossroads and facing new challenges in a post #metoo but ever more highly segregated global economy, which was recently described at a major international conference as our “feminist emergency” of today.

Both feminism and art history are independent, broad fields encompassing a range of ideas and approaches. As art historians Victoria Horne and Lara Perry have emphasized, if feminism “designates political organizing and activities aimed towards transforming the asymmetrical gendered relations that structure historical, legal, economic and social systems,” art history addresses historical and contemporary cultural practices, especially those dealing with art production, the market, criticism, and institutions (2017, 2). Their different aims aside, feminism and feminist theory have long struggled to maintain a degree of agency within art history. After the so-called “second wave” feminist movement infiltrated the discipline in the 1970s and 1980s, a certain taking for granted has haunted feminism’s position within art history, a phenomenon several scholars have recently sought to elucidate (Dimitrakaki and Perry 2015, Grant 2011, Horne and Perry 2017). While informative and necessary, none of these investigations consider the Nordic region.

Taking these issues into account, this article contemplates my research of the last four years within the Nordic context to explore how and why feminism has been relatively left out of the deliberations concerning the state of art history today.

Drawing upon the identification of some larger patterns within Danish art history and the detailed problematics of feminist art history’s double bind, I argue that feminism is germane to art history—and to its future. By reflecting on a recent feminist art historical endeavor, the international conference Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, the following offers some ideas on how a feminist art historical approach can make a constructive and crucial contribution to the field and the issues it faces today.

Waves and (re)surfacing

During the emergence of feminism as an organized social and political movement in the Nordic countries in the latter half of the 1970s, feminist art and art made by women generally aligned with wider international developments, in which gender difference became a crucial category in the creating and understanding of art, and artists focused primarily on issues of visibility, activism, performance, and the female body. Like their counterparts in the United States and Europe, Danish artists such as Ursula Reuter Christiansen (b. 1943), Kirsten Justesen (b. 1943), Lene Adler Petersen (b. 1944), and Jytte Rex’s (b. 1942) critical engagement with feminism informed their expansion of traditional forms of artistic media, processes, exhibitions, and training. This engagement also led to a radical rethinkings of issues related to representation, identity, and sexuality both within and outside the art world. With their artwork and cultural activism, these artists and their colleagues also organized and partook in, among others, two landmark feminist interventions into Danish culture: Damebilleder (Images of Women), 1970 [1]—one of the first feminist exhibitions in the world—and Kvindeudstillingen XX (Women’s Exhibition XX), 1975, a festival-like showcase that featured readings, discussions, and works by international and local artists and non-artists alike. [2]
The activism, art works, and exhibitions produced during the “second wave” feminist period in Denmark were well documented, which has come in handy for the relatively few but important art historical revisitations in the literature. The first moment when this occurred was around the early 2000s, and then again about ten years later. Two of the most important examples were

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Feminism and art history/historiography

What are we to make of this silence and resurfacing in a country that has built a national image out of gender equality? The problem is not simply a Danish or Nordic one, but pervasive throughout Anglo-European art history and its related institutions. In their book Politics in a Glass Case: Feminism, Exhibition Cultures and Curatorial Transgressions, art historians Angela Dimitrakaki and Lara Perry document how over the past 40 years, as feminism has become more visible within institutions, it has “lost its bite” and been unable to succeed in effecting sustainable change (3). One reason they posit for this is that museums and galleries tend to relinquish their responsibility for creating a comprehensive feminist agenda, instead looking to external art historians to undertake the work for them (180). Reflecting feminism’s double bind of historicism and activism, my own experience with Danish art institutions similarly suggests that feminism presents a dual problem: it is either viewed as ineffectual infiltrating the Nordic art world and its history. The potential of feminist theory and approaches from effective feminist art movement […] to avoid producing corrective tools (7).

While Nordic art history’s feminist silences betray blind spots and missed opportunities in ways that reflect the continued issue of gender inequality and feminism’s unrealized potential have been overshadowed—perhaps even partially caused—by the perceived image of the egalitarian Nordic welfare state, the exploitation of gender equality in nation building is in fact a side effect of an increasing alignment with privatization, deregulation, and neo-liberalism (2009). These circumstances have also had an impact on art historical narratives and historiography in significant, but not immediately visible ways. Many of the feminist artists of the 1970s, for example, were Marxist in outlook and critical of the capitalist compromises of the welfare system, but their exhibitions and works have nonetheless been later instrumentalized as evidence of the success of liberal democracy (Greaves 2022).

It becomes clear that within art history, the contours of the continued issue of gender inequality and feminism’s unrealized potential have been overshadowed—perhaps even partially caused—by the perceived image of the egalitarian Nordic welfare state. As a result, a disconnect has persisted that has prevented the radical and speculative potential of feminist theory and approaches from effectively infiltrating the Nordic art world and its history. This resulting implicit view has been that there is little need to reconsider women artists in terms of their gender since they have already achieved equality and have been treated democratically; this has even generated the idea that gender is a dépassé topic altogether.4 Indeed, except for some notable exceptions by art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Dimitrakaki, the taking for granted of feminism’s role within art history—as either historical moment or already completed activist project—has hindered feminist theory from being consistent­ly deployed as a vigorous approach within the field (2018). Historian Judith M. Bennett has documented how history has been problematic for feminism, arguing for renewed and sustained historical scrutiny: “feminism is impoverished by an inattention to history. By broaden­ing our temporal horizons, we can produce both better feminist history and better feminist theory” (2006, 31).5 These conflicting paradigms suggest that it is actually feminism’s history that holds the potential to reanimate feminism within art history. In their recent volume Feminism and Art History Now: Radical Critiques of Theory and Practice, Horne and Perry have made crucial inroads in this respect with their call for rehabilitated attention to feminist art history and historiography to reanimate feminism in the discipline, and thereby, art history itself. They argue that a critical, sustained revisiting of feminist art history and its periodic absences is necessary if we are to begin using feminist theory effectively for addressing art and its histories now: [The] critical and revolutionary feminist dimension enjoins us to look to the present and future and break with the patriarchal past; while the art historical process demands that we review and reflect on our relations with that which has gone before. […] to do justice to both impulses: to formulate a politics for the present and future, which acknowledges, but does not reduce us to, the past (2017, 2).

They continue: The writing of art history… emerged as a critical site for intervening within the production of modern subjectivities and related historical operations of dominance and exploitation. […] We must continue to ask how we can understand and write about the past and present of art in a manner that does not simply recuperate women and feminism to established circuits of meaning- and value-production. But this requires that as these circuits evolve, so should our tools (7).

These scholars provide a poignant reminder of the critical importance of actively addressing feminism’s history and its historiography as a means for realizing the activist potential of feminism. To redress art history as a field—one that is capable of reflecting and critiquing the myriad global urgencies we are facing—lives in the world today. In this respect, historicizing feminist art history is not a process of neutralization and distancing, but of empowerment and active engagement. It is a process that Horne and Perry describe as a “disruptive reenactment” that “aims to displace the vicious canonical history that insistently coheres a singular sense of the feminist art movement […] to avoid producing corrective accounts, in favor of historical accounts that struggle with ‘alternative ways of telling feminist stories’” (16).6

When we write art’s history, we must do so in a manner that self-reflectively acknowledges historiography’s double operation, in which history actively informs the present, while the present informs our understanding of history. Such attention, moreover, allows for a greater capacity for applying feminism, its histories and theories, as a presciently critical and activist tool for reapproaching, rewriting, and re-theorizing art history as a discipline relevant to its present moment.

Feminist futures

The above-cited concerns informing art history’s feminist emergency were at the forefront of the international conference 1 organized in November 2021, Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk. Produced as part of the research project Feminist Emergence: Women Artists in Denmark, 1960-Present at the University of Copen-
The conference sought to reconsider the generational framework of historical "waves," which has been so decisive for feminist art historical scholarship, to explore how the circulations and translations of this model have shaped art and its discourses and institutions across Europe since 1970. A range of twenty-one presentations and four keynotes reconsidered and introduced historical subjects and presented new research, methodological approaches, and issues in the form of theoretical contributions, historical scholarship, curatorial work, and performances. The program, which also included exhibition tours at both Louisiana and the Statens Museum for Kunst, was divided over two days with the following thematic sections: historical feminist foundations in Denmark; Pia Arke and Nordic colonialism; new/alter histories; migration, politics, and activism; feminist critical consciousness and invisibility, and feminism and inter-media experiments. Within each section, care was given to create a varied texture of disciplines, subjects, and approaches, alternating between performances and more standard academic papers.

We felt it was important to open the conference by revisiting the canonical feminist works and interventions of the 1970s with a session that introduced new ways of seeing them, as well as formerly unknown works such as an experimental short film by artist Mette Aare (b. 1943). These presentations reinvigorated a dialogue with younger scholars working on more contemporary art, while also introducing Denmark's little-known, but incredibly radical experiments to an international audience. One pioneering artist of the period even contributed when Ursula Reuter Christiansen screened her water- shed feminist film The Executioner, 1971, after which she spoke at length about it and her experiences. Several other conference presentations further emphasized the importance of historical engagement by critically reconsidering historical figures, works, and practices throughout Europe, as well as the nature of writing art's histories itself, shedding fresh light on those arenas in the process.

Current acute problems relevant to art history now were likewise crucial to the conference, and we sought to apply the agitational impulse initiated in the 1970s to address issues related to Nordic (de)colonialism, (post)migration, ecology, and neoliberal labor, such as visibility, representation, Black identity, queerness, indigeneity, and activism. Some of the highlights of these sessions came from the artists themselves, such as visionary Greenlandic artist Jesse Kleemann (b. 1959), who held the audience spellbound with her playful, critical performance exploring the function of Sikuksik (nagqu-teeqat), plain biscuits with a long colonial history. Danish-Korean artist Jane Jin Kaisen (b. 1980), meanwhile, spoke about and partially screened her intensely moving 2019 film Community of Parting, which was informed by her participation in an international women's delegation that crossed the border between North and South Korea and her ongoing commitment to communities affected by war and division. Southern Sámi artist Carela Grah's (b. 1982) lively and mischievous reading from her novel The Journey (2020) transported the audience into the being of the notion (Sámi shamans), exploring an animated universe where every entity has its own consciousness but is connected to one wholeness. And Danish artist Henriette Heiss (b. 1965) spoke about the politics of (in)visibility facing women artists and the facets of uselessness through a lyrical conversation with art historian Mathias Dunbolt.

The keynotes further reflected the dual historical/activist aims of the conference, with captivating talks by art historian Mathias Danbolt. The selection and experience of the contributions to Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present shaped art and art history in the first place.

Notes
1 See "Feminist Emergency," at Birkbeck College on 15 June 2017. Last accessed 31 March 2022. https://www.bbk.ac.uk/news/feminist-emergency.
2 Those include the two research projects I have led: Otherwise: Women Artists in Denmark, 1900-1960 and Feminist Emergency: Women Artists in Denmark, 1960-Present (both funded by the Novo Nordisk Foundation) at the University of Copenhagen and their main outputs thus far, namely the anthology Modern Women Artists in the Nordic Countries, 1900-1960, ed. Kerry Greaves (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), and the international conference Fast Forward: Women in European Art, 1970-Present at the Louisiana Museum of Modern art, 17-18 November 2022.
3 For more on these exhibitions see Anderberg 2015 and Women Down the Pub 2004.
4 In Danish art history in general, meanwhile, reassessments of women artists before 1960 are minimal. See my "Introduction," in Greaves 2023, 3-12.
5 About the persistence of inequality see Hansen 2005.
6 Those statistics are consistent, despite some promising attempts to address the situation, including the 2020 decision of the Council for Visual Arts in the City of Copenhagen to impose gender quotas on the purchase of art for the municipality.
7 According to Pollock, feminism functions as trauma because "it emerges repeatedly as a contestation of the..."
entire symbolic and imaginary orders of meaning and subjectivity. For this reason it is profoundly traumatic to its own core and potential subjects." (2016, 27).

8 For just one example of this, in the Norwegian context, see Åsebø 2021.

9 Also cited in Horne and Perry 2017, 4.

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