

Montez Press Interview:

SALT. editors Hannah Regel, Thea Smith and Jala Wahid in conversation with Berlin-based writer and critic Chloe Stead.

The three of you met when you were studying Fine Art together at Goldsmiths University. I was there too, in the year above you, and while I don't remember the atmosphere as being particularly hostile, I definitely remember realising at a certain point that the boys were curating themselves and their friends into exhibitions and not inviting the rest of us. Was this your experience? Can you tell me a little more about what led to the founding of SALT.?

Hannah Regel: This pretty much sums up why we started the mag. When I was there it felt like people were expected to make work that fit very neatly into that series of Whitechapel books, *The Sublime*, *The Everyday*, *Play*...

You mean the 'Documents on Contemporary Art' series? It's funny you should mention that, because most of these books were written by the people running our theory classes.

HR: Exactly. Anything that was slightly more slippery, or god forbid personal, just didn't really have a place. I remember being told that my work would be better if I looked at more male artists. There was certainly an air of sexism to the place.

Thea Smith: When it came to tutorials or group crits the discussion was never about the art I was making, but about the legitimacy of a feminist standpoint. It took me ages to recognise that there just wasn't a decent and varied discourse around feminism in art as there was other subjects like the ones Hannah mentioned. Feminism was sidelined as a historical era - a particular aesthetic (think Carolee Schneeman's 1975 performance *Interior Scroll*) and female artists weren't really mentioned in other lectures or seminars. I've come across so many female, trans and poc artists, writers and thinkers since starting *SALT.*, and I can't believe that none of this stuff is taught, or even acknowledged.

Jala Wahid: For me, it was less the attitude towards feminist discourse amongst our friends and peers and more an issue with it not being a rooted part of the curriculum, which is something I've been reminded of re-entering art education. Feminism was always seen a side topic or a module you could casually dip into, rather than a crucial and core part of education. On top of this, it was the norm to look at and have suggested to you, predominantly male artists and writers, perpetuating the idea that male experience was the default experience from which foundational knowledge is built.

The first issue was on the body. What kind of submissions were you looking for? I'd also be interested in hearing what you were reading at the time and what effect that had on your decisions.

HR: It was only themed 'The Body' in retrospect, as all the other issues were themed and we felt if it had to be anything, it would be that. The call out was very informal, we just asked our friends really. I don't think we really knew, or could have known, what we were looking for. It was only by the fourth issue 'Pageantry', that we had a firm idea of what our collective interests were and how we wanted to articulate them. The first three were very much about getting to know each other and ourselves. Dodie Bellamy's *Barf Manifesto* was definitely on my reading list at that time. I took it pretty seriously; it stuck out in contrast to the kind of aestheticised, apolitical feminism that we saw in some of our peers, and our want to rail against that is more-or-less how we bonded.

TS: At first we didn't really know what we wanted, we just had an instinct and a collective drive to do something. We didn't even write an editorial for the first issue! We recently did an online residency for otdac.org, in which we went through all our themes and reevaluated what they were doing, or at least what we thought they were doing. It was interesting to see how our concept of *SALT.* has evolved and been refined through each issue. I think it definitely took until issue 4 to really get it right. I think at the time of the first issue I was reading things like Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* for the first time, and realising that feminism could be articulated in multiple and diverse ways, and that I still had a lot to learn.

JW: I remember one of our first conversations when we met up to talk about beginning *SALT.* I found it really hard to articulate what I wanted from it, or even what feminism meant for me at that time. But I really felt there was a conversation missing that didn't account for my gender or race (and also these together, as most feminist discourse had within the institution was very white) and we wanted to figure out how we fit in and what we could do. In terms of submissions, *SALT.* began in a really local way, through friends and friends of friends, and we wanted to find others that we could align ourselves with and wanted to be part of a community.

How was the early reception of the magazine?

TD: We only made 50 of the first issue, on the photocopiers in the library, and we were excited and surprised that they all sold at the launch event. Since then we built up our circulation slowly, making more each time. At first we always organised exhibitions for the launch night, which helped get more people out in support, as it was more of an occasion.

JW: From the start, we had a supportive network that were eager to be involved and contribute and this extended to spaces and artist-run organisations that would offer us platforms for exhibitions or launch events.

While other journals, such as the London-based Tender, expressly ask that contributors identify as female, you've never done this. Was it always clear that this would be the case, or was it fiercely debated at the beginning? Talking more generally, how important do you think male input is to the wider conversation around feminism?

HR: Yes! This was for sure a conscious decision. We were at an art school where whenever you spoke about gender or identity politics you had to firmly defend that as a legitimate place to speak from. We wanted *SALT*. to be a place where the validity of these positions were to be given for everyone, not just women. This seems fairly obvious now, but it felt so urgent at the time.

TS: We always wanted *SALT*. to exist to be able to talk about contemporary art from a feminist standpoint, and even take feminism for granted as a core ethos. *SALT*. was never a journal of women's art or women's issues. I think we probably began doing this on the cusp of a new openness about the diversity of race and gender and it seemed like such a restrictive concept to limit inclusion to those presenting as women.

JW: Having said this, we've consistently reassessed our position as editors. Since there is a necessary discussion to be had about censorship and visibility, we've had to discuss our own position in terms of who we select to be published and at whose expense this occurs. As much as we rely on our call for submissions, we also solicit content from others and our priority is to provide a platform for those marginalised (poc, non-cis male).

The new issue of SALT. is called The Furies. Can you talk a little more about the idea of anger as a productive and even revolutionary force?

HR: I think anger is what fuels most of what we do. It really sucks to be making art in the present, when the already sparse support structures that allow marginalised and unprivileged bodies into the art world are being dismantled. I don't think it's even a question of agency, you just have to be angry, you can't live in this world and not be.

TS: It's scary when you have so many reasons to be angry in the course of a day that your anger is reduced to a tiny black hole in your stomach, sucking up all the outward signs it might make, so you can continue like everything is fine and not explode. It's damaging, painful and heavy. It's so easy for anger to turn into depression and anxiety, and we wanted to explore the scars that this can create, and kind of open up and allow a discourse around the consequences that anger can have. Releasing it can be powerful, but it can also leave you vulnerable. The only way forward is externalising and collectivising anger, so that it doesn't turn inwards and eat you up.

JW: Anger has been so crucial to *SALT*. and to building a community within which we can support each other and act together. It has motivated us to self-organise and to collectively use feelings which would otherwise cripple and consume us into something productive, forceful and even hopeful.

Some of the anger expressed in your introduction and in the contributions is reserved for London. How has the city changed during the years you have lived there?

HR: It's a really hard place to live in terms of making wages and rent meet, which seeps into everything else. At least that's how I have found it. But at the same time I feel like leaving would be something akin to defeat. I think my relationship to the city is characterised by stubbornness and damp.

TS: I hadn't thought about it as being specific to London! But the situation of trying to exist here does take its toll, particularly in relation to wages and housing. But there is still something so magnetic about the city that you just keep trying. London gaslights you, really. Every year you make excuses for it and accept worse and worse situations in the hope that one day you'll crack it.

JW: Every year I consider leaving, but so much has been invested in the community that has been built through *SALT*. and our individual practices. This community has also strengthened as London became an increasingly difficult place to live because we had more to be angry about.

Another topic in this issue is “perverse” bodies: bodies that ooze, drip, seep and cannot be contained. This seems to be a theme throughout many of the issues of SALT. as well as in your own practices as artists. I also see it in the sculptures and writing of many of your contemporaries. What do you think makes this so relevant at the moment?

HR: I think the corporeal abjection of trying to exist is pretty overwhelming at the moment. I'd be suspicious of anyone that made art that held itself together!

TS: It's interesting that the object of intrigue is still the body. I suppose one element of exploring the possibilities of a feminist discourse is to counter western (male) art's ocularcentric (& phallogocentric) viewpoint is to think about a more embodied language, which is not clean, neat, or polite. I do recognise that there has been a resurgence in this, but artists like Alina Szapocznikow or Leonora Carrington were challenging ideas about the body way back, from a dire need to express what it means to bear the scars of experience. Who knows if they felt as though their work was relevant at the time? Maybe we are fortunate to be in a network of peers that can articulate ideas about the body via complex means. It certainly results in more interesting work.

JW: When you realise there is a lot put in place to make bodies feel inadequate about the way they exist, marginalising and labelling bodies as non-conforming, looking at defining other ways of being can be an option. The Furies are a good example of this, embodying unpalatable emotions in a non-human way, taking the form of insects or bad weather. And the same with materials that behave in volatile, uncontrollable ways, and looking at co-opting this into a specific agenda. It's a lot like when we talked about anger. How do you take something that doesn't fit in and rearticulate it?

One huge way that the – let's say the mainstream – conversation around feminism has changed in the last few years is the realisation by white feminists that they (and I include myself in this) have been ignoring the voices of women of colour, trans woman and those living with disabilities. Was this always a consideration when making SALT. or was there also a process of getting 'woke'?

HR: There was definitely a process of getting 'woke'. I think we thought for a long time that because we operated on an open submission basis we were automatically inclusive. It was pretty naive not to acknowledge that the field of people our call outs reach is an incredibly specific one of middle class, university educated, predominantly white, cis women. We are constantly trying to find ways to navigate this problem.

TS: Totally, at first I think we were far too excited by the fact that anyone was interested in this niche thing we were doing, and wanted to be in it at all, to really consider the limited inclusivity of it. But it has become a core consideration of ours when putting the mag together, or suggestions for reading groups. Like Hannah said, we're always trying to get better. It has also been really great to see other, similar projects like OOMK tackling this head on.

JW: This has definitely been something we've had to readdress continually and which is why soliciting content has been important because we understand that SALT. was born within a specific demographic and so only so far reaching.

Because I know you're all big readers, I really want to ask you the titles of the books that have been the most influential to you. For me book No. 1 has to be Chris Kraus' I Love Dick. Hannah, I don't know if you remember this, but you leant me your copy and when you gave it me you said, "This is a life changer" and it really was.

HR: Such a life changer! It was definitely the first thing I'd read that said it was ok to be a complete mess, and a fucking slow one too. It sounds dumb, but I think it's so easy to forget that, and get sucked into a kind of high functioning, highly productive, coherent feminist sphere, which is so not reflective of how I actually relate to my body or surroundings. I'm currently reading and would recommend: Alice Notley's *Grave of Light*, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, Marosa di Giorgio's *The History of Violets*, Marilyn Hackers' *Love, Death and the Changing of the Seasons*, Ingeborg Bachmann's *Malina* and lots of Paul Celan.

TS: Ha, I think I've leant all my Chris Kraus books to people with similar exclamations. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* taught me a lot about what a book could be, as well as Maggie Nelson's *Bluets* and Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*. Hito Steyerl's *The wretched of the screen* has also been really influential on my work, not just because of her subject matter and the way that she can so effortlessly deconstruct the paradoxes of contemporary art, technology, culture, and life, but the way that she intricately structures her arguments, and the language and references she uses: I'm in awe. I'm ever thankful to the person who recommended that I read Elizabeth Hardwick's *Sleepless Nights*, when I asked about authors who didn't write in a linear way; and to my aunt for giving me Elizabeth Smart's *By grand central station* I sat down and wept when I was an awkward teenager and she realised I was smart enough to appreciate it. I also love science fiction, and would recommend Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time*, and Anna Kavan's *Ice as a starting point*.

JW: *The Glass Essay* by Anne Carson became really important to me last year, during a time when I felt very lonely but learnt to turn solitary feelings into a productive environment. I make a point of revisiting *The Passion According to G.H.* every so often as it's always been relevant to me when thinking about how bodies and feelings can be redefined; but really anything by Clarice Lispector is great (I'm currently reading *Hour of the Star*). *Magenta Soul Whip* by Lisa Robertson, which took me awhile to get into but now I really love.