

Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection, The Photographers' Gallery, London, U.K.

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[See table of contents](#)

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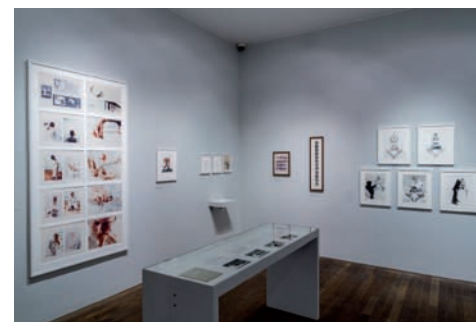
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*Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s:
Works from the Verbund Collection,
installation views, The Photographers'
Gallery, London, 2016–2017.*

Photos : © Hydar Dewachi, courtesy of
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Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s: Works from the Verbund Collection

“It is difficult to say where / precisely, or to say / how large or small I am,” writes Margaret Atwood in her 1998 poem “This is a Photograph of Me,” in which the narrator gives, from beyond the grave, directions to scrutinize more closely an image in which her presence is obscured: “but if you look long enough, / eventually / you will be able to see me.” What might happen, what might you see, she seems to ask—what reveals itself when you refuse to ignore what is right in front of your face, staring back at you?

Stay longer, look harder, question concealment, refuse silent and insidious violence, deny the imposition of shame, employ alternative representational devices to upend norms, to tear apart the conventions of that which is put forward as neutral and naturally occurring. These are some of the poignant demands, among a litany of fervently articulated others, put forward by works in *Feminist Avant-Garde of the 1970s* at The Photographers' Gallery. Including more than two hundred works by forty-eight artists from twenty countries, the exhibition is co-curated by the gallery's Anna Danneman and Gabriele Schor of the Verbund Collection, from which its content is drawn. It is divided into four categories: the borders and restrictions of the domestic sphere, the sexualization and objectification of the female body, cultural notions of beauty, and gender stereotypes. Though perhaps predictable in foci, these concepts are employed loosely and explored variously by the works grouped within them, most of which naturally share overlapping concerns—a testament to the many possible iterations of the personal as political, and vice versa.

Though all hailing from the same time period, the works vary in renown: early pieces by now-household names such as Cindy Sherman, Ana Mendieta, Francesca Woodman, Lynn Herschman Leeson, VALIE EXPORT, and Hannah Wilke sit alongside Karin Mack, Sanja Iveković,

Penny Slinger, and Birgit Jürgenssen. Practices span photography, collage, performance, film, and video, and approaches range from the sinister, disturbing, and anguished to the revelatory, joyful, and deeply humorous. Mack photographs a photograph of a woman that has been pierced with nails and metal skewers; Slinger poses inside a wedding cake, a piece of it removed to reveal her naked body, grinning, legs spread. Suzanne Lacey stages a performance protest to address media depictions of violence against women, and Renate Eisenegger irons an entire storey of an apartment building, including the floor in the hallway.

What ultimately unites these works is an incisive use of lens-based media to both reveal and rethink what it means to be both subject and object—in private and public, in one's own body and its attendant images, in concept, aesthetic, and gender. Critically on display is the degree to which the concerns addressed feel contemporary decades later; many of these concerns endure in these artists' current work, as well as in the practices of those whom they have undeniably influenced, to continue to question what it means for a woman to say, “This is a photograph of me.”

Emily LaBarge

The Photographers' Gallery,
London, U.K., October 7,
2016—January 29, 2017