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To show but not tell

formalism as means to rearrange and destabilize memories of 1970s feminist art

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To show but not tell: formalism as means to rearrange and destabilize memories of 1970s feminist art.

Ellen Suneson.

Abstract: Over the last decades, a body of feminist research (Angkjær Jørgensen & Åsebø 2020-2025, Freeman 2010, Halberstam 2022, Hemmings 2011, Tesfagiorgis 1993) has problematized established stories that chronicle the development of Western feminist movements' recent past. Drawing from this strain of previous research, this paper is particularly influenced by a number of scholarly works that analyse how conventional but simplified stories about the 1970s tend to produce present-day scholarly frameworks wherein certain kinds of feminist representations become discarded as politically naïve, awkward, or uninteresting (Angkjær Jørgensen & Åsebø 2020-2025, Robinson 2008, Rogoff 1992, Wadstein MacLeod 2012).

This paper stresses the potential of employing formalism (Doyle 2006, Getsy 2015, Pollock 1988, Simmons 2021) as a methodological framework for studying visual representations of the experience of subordination in feminist and queer feminist art produced in the Nordic countries during the 1970s. This methodological framework, this paper argues, proposes both new interpretations of already recognized artworks and suggests the artistic importance of a number of previously largely overlooked artworks and performances from the time. As noticeable in its title, this paper explores the implication that a different methodological framework, focused on showing (describing/watching/comparing) rather than telling (placing visual material into established narratives of the past), will have for the interpretation of feminist and queer feminist artworks produced in the Nordic countries during the 1970s.