

Cosima zu Knyphausen: Itálicas de la autora

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For her inaugural show at Revolver Galería, Cosima zu Knyphausen (b.1988) borrows from a simple motif well known to the history of art: women reading. Particularly popular for painters of the Dutch Renaissance and French Impressionism, it was usually portrayed by male artists,¹ and used as a chance to peer into a private moment, the reading figure secluded in an interior.

But Cosima's reading subjects are different, populating another kind of space than these solitary women painted by the likes of Monet and Vermeer. Their reading is a communal act, situating them in a lineage not of male artistic canon, but of marginalized scholarship and excellence. Cosima takes as inspiration Christine de Pizan (1364 – c. 1430), a writer from the beginning of the French Renaissance who is notable as an early feminist thinker and as the first European woman to make a living from writing.² Most famous of her works is *The Book of the City of Ladies*, an allegorical text describing the building of a city to house the extraordinary women of history. The narrator Christine builds it at the behest of the ladies Reason, Rectitude, and Justice, who appear to her after she expresses shame about her womanhood, having read many treatises against her gender—written, of course, by men. It should be noted that Christine used the term “ladies” to refer not to women of nobility or wealth, but rather to women of great virtue—a quality available to all women, and necessary in standing up to men who maligned them.³

The “city” that Christine creates is not physical but literary; within the medium of writing, Christine is able to cross boundaries of space and time, bringing together accomplished and virtuous women throughout history. This imagined utopia becomes the setting for Cosima's “ladies,” a series of women and non-binary friends and collaborators who sit in her studio reading.⁴ Inspired by tapestries,⁵ she adapts illuminations from a manuscript by Christine's largely female workshop into painted backdrops in pastel colors and easy lines, which are then

¹ A famous exception to this is, of course, Mary Cassatt.

² Christine was well-known in her time, but absent from history until the late twentieth century: *The Book of the City of Ladies* was translated into English in 1521 and did not receive a modern retranslation until 1982.

³ “In brief, all women—whether noble, bourgeois, or lower-class—be well-informed in all things and cautious in defending your honor and chastity against your enemies! My ladies, wee how these men accuse you of so many vices in everything. Make liars of them all by showing forth your virtue.” Christine not only transcended class boundaries between women, but she also, in their positioning against men, asserted that women were themselves a class. See Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffery Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 256.

⁴ Myself included.

⁵ An account of now lost sixteenth-century tapestries depicting illustrations from *The Book of the City of Ladies* owned by Queen Elizabeth I and other royalty, see Susan Groag Bell, *The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

painted again in her series of portraits.⁶ Christine's ladies watch over Cosima's; even whilst technically solo in the studio (aside, of course, from the painter), the portrait subjects become part of a community, rendered within the same plane.

As well as working within painting, Cosima works within the medium of citation. "Itálicas de la autora" translates to "Italics author's own,"⁷ a phrase found often in footnotes to denote the agency of the author in altering the text cited, regarding it as a mutable dialogical partner rather than as a stable didactic artifact and thus acknowledging that it is alive rather than dead. In *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), Sara Ahmed writes, "Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow."⁸ In this way, Christine's medium is also citation: She builds her city brick by brick (a process recreated in the gallery through Cosima's brick-sized paintings), and as Ahmed writes, "Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings."⁹ Christine's project in *The City of Ladies*—in building its walls from "feminist bricks"—was to write a "universal history of women,"¹⁰ to put in one place the achievements of women, and in doing so, "acknowledge her debt" to them—achievements otherwise purposefully kept dispersed by a canon of male writers whose "voices overwhelm her, their combined 'authority' undermining what she knows to be true about women."¹¹

In order to escape the "overwhelming voices," Christine envisioned a space extrinsic from misogynist society and culture. Cosima, like many before her, followed suit.¹² Whereas earlier renditions of the reading woman by male artists evoke a feeling of voyeuristic, undetected interruption of—intrusion into, even—a private moment, Cosima's studio (and Christine's

⁶ This manuscript is held at the British Library and available for viewing in full at <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8361>.

⁷ Translation *this* author's own.

⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰ Earl Jeffery Richards, introduction to de Pizan, *City of Ladies*, xxx.

¹¹ Sharon L. Jansen, "I Have a Dream: Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies* and Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*," *Reading Women's Worlds from Christine de Pizan to Doris Lessing: A Guide to Six Centuries of Women Writers Imagining Rooms of Their Own* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 27.

¹² Some examples from literature include, to cite those given by Jansen, Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, Margaret Cavendish's *The Convent of Pleasure*, Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto*, among others. Examples of all-female spaces executed in reality include, to cite those given by Adrienne Rich in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," "witches, *femmes seules*, marriage resisters, spinsters, autonomous widows, and/or lesbians," as well as the Beguines "who earned their livings as spinners, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed-until the Church forced them to disperse-to live independent both of marriage and of conventual restriction" and "the secret sororities and economic networks reported among African women; [...] Chinese marriage resistance sisterhoods—communities of women who refused marriage, or who if married often refused to consummate their marriages and soon left their husbands." See Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 635, 651.

surrounding imaginary) allows her sitters privacy even while they are in company.¹³ Many of the portrait subjects face the painter—and by extension, the viewer—head-on, acknowledging their presence and inviting them to not only witness but share in the moment.

The gaze is different in a space without men; the act of viewing is subsumed by the act of collaboration—as is the eroticism that comes with it. As Adrienne Rich writes in her historic essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” a “lesbian continuum”¹⁴ allows for the discovery of the “erotic in female terms: as that which is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself, as an energy not only diffuse but, as Audre Lorde has described it, omnipresent in ‘the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic,’ and in the sharing of work.”¹⁵ There’s an erotic present in Cosima’s paintings, her studio, and her source material. I hope the viewer finds it, too.

¹³ One of the strongest compliments I’ve ever given was to my best friend, though it could have sounded to an outside ear like a lament—that sometimes when I was with her, I felt alone.

¹⁴ Rich defines a lesbian continuum as a continuum of “women-identified experience [...] of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.” See Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 648–9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 650. See Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*, Out & Out Books Pamphlet no. 3 (New York: Out & Out Books, 1979).