

University for the Creative Arts  
Research Project Portfolios

# Feminist Soft Resistance

By Minna Pöllänen



# Project Details

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Name of Researcher:	Minna Pöllänen
Name of Output:	Feminist Soft Resistance
UCARO link/s:	<a href="https://research.uca.ac.uk/5113">https://research.uca.ac.uk/5113</a>
Output Type:	M – Exhibition; a solo and a group exhibition
Year and mode of dissemination:	2017, <i>Rehearsal Space</i> , solo exhibition, Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki  2017, <i>India Club – Independence</i> , Specular Assembly group exhibition, India Club, London
Key Words:	Installation, feminism, resistance, activism, participation, relational aesthetics, exhibition
Funding:	Both exhibitions have been supported by Arts Promotion Centre Finland: Artist grant to develop a new body of work - €20,000 Rehearsal Space materials - €3,000

# Synopsis

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‘Feminist Soft Resistance’ is a research output by Minna Pöllänen comprising a solo exhibition and a group exhibition, both drawing from the same developing body of research. The research uses multi-material installations to explore the themes of feminism, protest and power.

The first exhibition, ‘Rehearsal Space’, was a solo installation at Gallery Forum Box in Helsinki. It consisted of six soft shields (each of which carried a backstitched depiction of a hand), a booklet of drawings, a large mirror and a photograph. The shields have also been used as feminist protest tools in demonstrations.

The second, group, exhibition, with the visual art collective Specular Assembly, took place at the India Club in London and developed the research to produce a work titled ‘Shield’. This was composed of 5 flags and a wall-hanging depicting

outlines of a person struggling with, and slowly lowering, a shield-shaped object.

The research explores the relationship between art and feminist activism and how to encourage seepages between the two through objects (shield and flag). It draws from participatory art, whilst questioning the rules of participation that are often laid out in these practices. In the ‘Rehearsal Space’ exhibition visitors were encouraged to use the six soft shields, subverting the idea of a shield as a heavy, masculine object associated with battle and division. ‘Shield’ also invited viewers to engage with the works, in this case flags, which could be detached from their base on the wall.

This portfolio includes evidence of the research aims, context and processes which led to new insights. It is illustrated with images of both exhibitions.

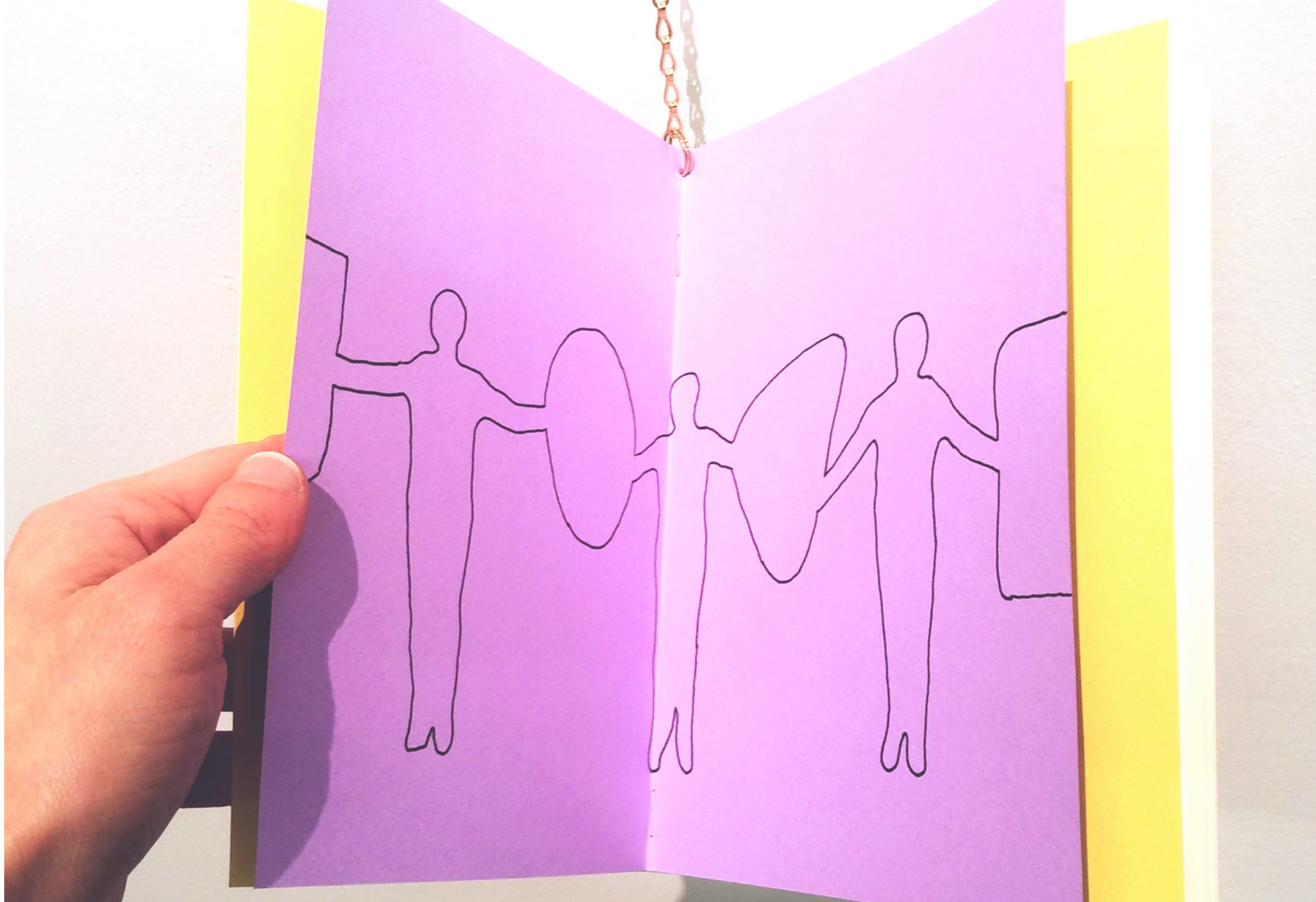
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*Rehearsal Space* exhibition,  
Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki 2017





*Rehearsal Space* exhibition,  
Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki 2017





*Rehearsal Space* exhibition,  
Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki 2017

# Context

‘Feminist Soft Resistance’ explores the relationship between art and feminist activism. The research is located within the field of visual and participatory art practices and feminist discourses. It suggests that there is a socio-political climate of growing isolationism and misogyny (associated with Donald Trump’s presidency in the US and Brexit in the UK, for example) which has sought to take rights away from women and marginalised groups, and thus that it is urgent to form new ways of feminist thinking and making.

The research builds upon Pöllänen’s previous work on similar themes. For example, ‘Signs of the Times’ was made during a three-month artist residency at Triangle Arts Association in Brooklyn in 2015 and examines acts and symbols of power, while ‘Signs of Flood’ (2016) was a collaboration with Bang Geul Han, examining power in relation to social media and neoliberalism. ‘Varying Orders’ (2016) was a site-specific installation, realised as part of the artist collective Specular Assembly’s annual group exhibition at the India Club in London, which considered the Salt March of 1930 in India as an act of non-violent civil disobedience. Throughout these works Pöllänen revisits outlines of the body and particular body parts to connect to these themes.

‘Feminist Soft Resistance’ adds to this corpus a feminist perspective, underpinned by the work of thinkers such as Sara Ahmed. Pöllänen draws upon Ahmed’s examination of feminist protest and how ‘gender becomes naturalized as a property of

bodies, objects, and spaces’ (Ahmed 2006: 58). In this respect, the work also marks a trajectory from Pöllänen’s previous research in that it is interested not just in images of bodies but in art which is malleable and material; both depicting bodies and inviting bodily interaction. This further connects to Ahmed’s concept of the ‘affect alien’, those who do not fit within, and can disrupt, the dominant ideology (Ahmed, 2010).

The project draws from participatory art, whilst questioning the rules of participation that are often laid out in these practices. In this context the work of Claire Bishop (2012) is useful, particularly her chapter ‘The Social Turn’ in which she observes the shift that occurred under New Labour towards socially driven funding for the arts with a particular focus on participation. Pöllänen’s research suggests that even with this renewed emphasis on participation there was a potentially elitist and hierarchical sense of who could participate and where, and so her work attempts to push beyond these limits.

## REFERENCES

Ahmed, S. (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Ahmed, S. (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Bishop, C. (2012) *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso.

# Research Questions and Aims

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Research questions:

How to negotiate the presentation and function of an object between the realms of (feminist) art and activism in a way that allows seepages between the two through the object?

How to engage visitors in a white cube gallery setting to interact and move with the objects?

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Research aims:

To examine the relationship between art and feminist activism and to encourage seepages between the two

To explore how the object (shield and flag) can function in both realms without becoming a mere documentation/presentation of one in the other

To expand ideas around participatory practice

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# Research Methods and Process

Following theoretical research into participatory art practices and relational aesthetics, as well as the subversive possibilities of embroidery, the form of the shield was chosen. The shield acts as a sign of battle that could then be subverted, either through making the object soft and embroidering it (using a craft associated with women and domesticity), or by including it on the soft form of the flag.

For example, in 'Rehearsal Space' each shield carries a backstitched depiction of a hand belonging to Margaret of Antioch, a widely portrayed female saint, whose story is linked back to the pagan divinity Aphrodite. Margaret fought the devil but is repeatedly pictured as an onlooker of her own story: fearful, praying or passively holding different objects. This varying gestural language reworks the idea of the shield as something that separates, but rather suggests a dialogue and a soft resistance. Floating on the surface of the fabric, out of their original context, the hands take on a more secular, ambiguous and active role, inviting visitors to explore new body positions for compassion, resistance and gathering. This is further developed in 'Shield', where the depiction of a shield being lowered reinforces feminist ideas around soft resistance.

The challenge was then to prompt engagement and interaction with the work. To address this, Pöllänen performed as an 'activator' for the work, staying in the space and moving with the shields, but remaining anonymous with nothing marking her out as the originator of the work. Pöllänen also explored ideas around 'immersive' installation-making by turning 'Rehearsal Space' into a dance studio-like space and including a long, wall-length mirror, a sign saying, 'please use the shields' and a booklet of drawings depicting alternative ways of using a shield (e.g. sitting on it, several people holding and connecting through one shield). This method of display was also chosen to open up the idea of resistance and re-think it in the context of participatory art. Moreover, Pöllänen welcomed visitors to

take the shields out of the gallery, removing the work from her control and allowing for greater audience autonomy.

It became clear that the 'activation' of the work by one person, whether the artist or a visitor, was a key to encourage people to use the objects in the exhibition. In 'Rehearsal Space', the mirror also played a role by offering the possibility to indirectly observe others and oneself in relation to the shields. This observational quality made it easier for visitors to try out different positions with the shields, as they still had 'control' over the sight of their body through the reflection in the mirror. Photographs taken through the mirror expanded the project online and into social media, adding another dimension to expanded participation and feminist activism. The booklet was another 'activator' of the work. After going through the drawings, visitors started mimicking the positions from the booklet and then expanded to create their own.

Many of the same techniques were utilised in the creation and installation of 'Shield'. The inclusion of the flags echoed that of the interactive materials as visitors were encouraged to detach the flags from their base on the wall and use them as they pleased. The large wall hanging in 'Shield' was also a direct link to 'Rehearsal Space' as its depiction of a person hugging a shield, rather than wielding it defensively, suggests that the demonstration tool can become a comfort during resistance.

Lastly, Pöllänen explored the use of the art outside of the gallery such as in feminist marches, and included documentation of hands-on activism in the exhibition space: in 'Rehearsal Space' a photograph of one of the shields being used in the Women's March was positioned unobtrusively outside the main gallery space in order to hint at the activist possibilities of the shield, but without this use taking over the installation or turning the space into a 'documentation' of activism.



2017, *India Club – Independence*,  
Specular Assembly group  
exhibition, India Club, London



2017, *India Club – Independence*,  
Specular Assembly group  
exhibition, India Club, London





Interaction with the flags at *India Club – Independence, Specular*  
Assembly group exhibition, India  
Club, London

# Research Contribution and Recognition

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Research insights and contribution:

The research is an opening, a possibility for movement, re-thinking and communication. Soft, hand-embroidered shields and flags embroidered with shields suggest new meanings and uses for a masculine object commonly associated with battle, defence and division. The objects are for the visitor to interact with, whether for comfort, to share, to sit on, to hug, to hide under, to play with or to say no with.

The conflicting message created by the combination of the hand gestures and the form of the shield, and the combination of the body, shield and flag, created an ambiguity that helped the work exist and intertwine in both art and activist realms without becoming solely one or the other and prompted questions around gestures and their meaning. This enabled expansion from 'using' the shields and flags into discussing ideas around feminist art and activism through them in a manner akin to relational aesthetics.

In 'Rehearsal Space' the resistance is firm and rooted in 'softness'. In 'Shield' audiences are prompted to consider how we put up and struggle with our own prejudices. The work suggests lowering those internal borders - rather than hiding behind a shield, sitting on top of it and being open to interaction.

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# Research Contribution and Recognition

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## Dissemination:

‘Rehearsal Space’ was a solo exhibition at Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki, Finland. The gallery counted 1,180 visitors to the show.

‘Shield’ was part of *India Club – Independence*, a Specular Assembly group exhibition at India Club, London. The exhibition featured 7 artists and had approximately 400-500 visitors.

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## Follow-on activities:

### DEMONSTRATIONS

The shields are also used as feminist protest tools outside of the gallery context. The photograph in the installation, and included in this portfolio, was taken during the Women’s March in London which took place in January 2017. The shields have continued to be used in demonstrations such as those against austerity politics in Helsinki in 2017.

### TALKS

2017, Specular Assembly artist talk, India Club, London  
2018, Feminist Art Activisms and Artivisms, poster presentation, Middlesex University

### PROJECTS

The research from ‘Feminist Soft Resistance’, has gone on to inform Pöllänen’s recent project, ‘Let Me Leak for You’ (2019). A third collaboration with artist Bang Geul Han, the work includes interactive sculptures, textiles, and sound to create an environment that encourages tactile exploration and deep listening. The project gestures towards making the cultural invisibility of bodily leakage visible, with a particularly feminist approach to menstruation which subverts the associated embarrassment or shame, turning it into a productive and creative vehicle.

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*Women's March, London, 2017*





*Women's March, London, 2017*



Figures with shields, moving from holding the shield to sitting upon it





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COVER IMAGES

*Rehearsal Space exhibition,  
Gallery Forum Box, Helsinki 2017*

