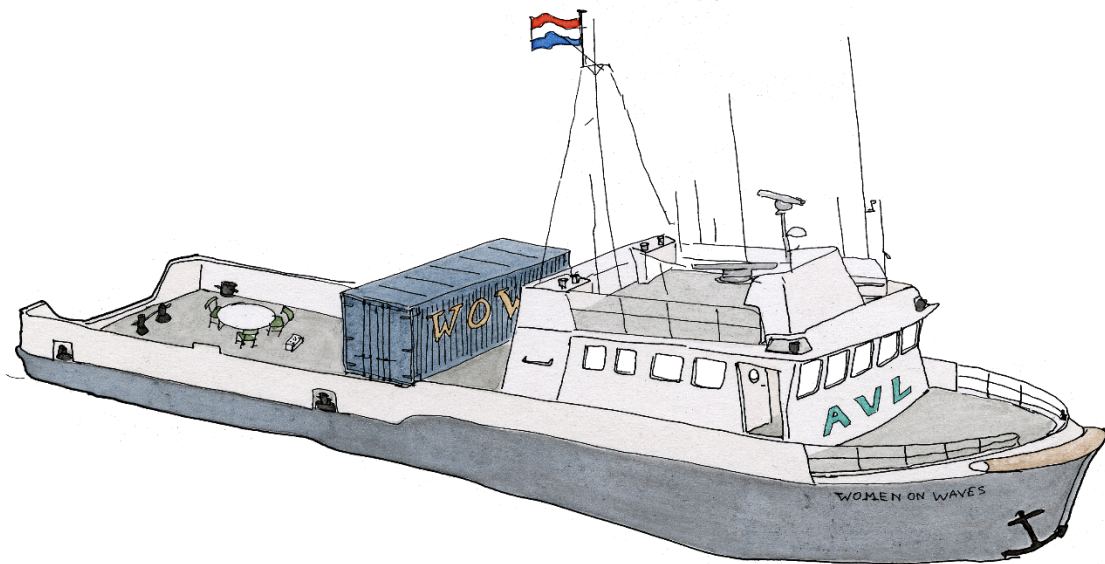


The journey of the *A-Portable*

The pioneering movable abortion clinic
designed by Joep Van Lieshout for *Women on Waves*



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Cover Image: Drawing by Joep Van Lieshout. Retrieved on March 2022 from Official archives AVL



Figure 1. In the back of the Atelier Van Lieshout, the artwork is stored on top of other shipping containers designed by the same artist. Photo by Linda Del Rosso, February 10th, 2022.

Abstract

This paper analyzes the case study of the artwork *A-Portable* (2001) by Joep Van Lieshout commissioned by the organization for abortion rights *Women on Waves* (WoW), as a pioneering example of art activism. When abortion was considered a controversial topic in society, this work has successfully contributed to sharing public awareness about the risks of illegal unsafe abortions performed in countries in which this medical practice was not allowed by the government. This abortion clinic inside a shipping container sailed the ocean in several sea campaigns, and later made its debut in the art world, such as in the Exhibition at the *Venice Biennale* in 2001. The *A-Portable* is not a stand-alone example in the history of feminism, and since the 19th century with the suffragist movements, art has been frequently used as a medium in feminist history. Other examples of art activism are mentioned in the paper, such as the public performance of the feminist Serbian artist Tanja Ostojić at the same Venice Biennale, and the more recent research of the American architect and author Lori Brown, who in 2013 published the book “Contested Spaces”, about improving the architectural features of abortion clinics for women’s wellbeing.

The following research takes into consideration several sources regarding the history of abortion rights and the action of *WoW*, to contextualize and explain the influence of art in the women’s emancipation process. Moreover, through an interview with Joep Van Lieshout, the artist’s point of view has also been crucial to find a complete answer to the research question. The final findings will demonstrate that art has always been a powerful media used by politics, and in this case, has created an opportunity for *WoW* to make a change in the public and private spheres. In the public, it served to stimulate people’s empathy around the topic of legal abortion, while in the private it created a safe space and a shelter from the violent opposition movements, finding physical and psychological help while performing this delicate medical procedure.

Introduction

After a couple of minutes of searching in between the numerous keys in the office, I finally found the one labeled “Loods 2 & 3”, for the back courtyard of the Atelier. According to my colleagues, this was the place where all the more resistant artworks would be placed at the end of their “artistic career”. After opening the rusty and heavy metal gate, I first noticed the intimidating sculpture of a huge black mouse, undoubtedly reflecting the style of my internship’s boss, Joep Van Lieshout. Next to it were some trailers and a row of stacked shipping containers, as visible in the photography on the previous page (Figure 1). I had seen many pictures of the *A-Portable*, and the logo of the association made quite clear which one I was looking for, weathered after being left for years outdoors in the cold. Some designers who used to work in the Atelier twenty years ago told me that a few years after the abortion clinic was realized, in 2000, it was placed in the sculpture garden (Figure 2), and some interns of the Atelier used to live inside it. The room covered in polyester kept a slight toxic smell and consisted of very narrow living space. However, “housing in Rotterdam was already expensive and many young interns could not afford it” as my coworker said.¹ Today it just looks like a sad and rusty shipping container, but in reality, it carries an incredible history, representing a pioneering symbol of a fight for women’s abortion rights.

Figure 2. The A-Portable in the sculpture garden of AVL, surrounded by other artworks (2002). Retrieved from official photo archive AVL on April 10th, 2022.



The story of the *A-Portable* begins in the year 2000, when Atelier Van Lieshout (AVL) converted a simple shipping container into a safe and functioning abortion clinic, to be placed on a ship sailing in the ocean to foreign countries with restrictive abortion laws. (Figure 3) Founded in Rotterdam in 1995 by the Dutch artist Joep Van Lieshout*, AVL produces art on the frontiers of

¹ Conversations with older colleagues, retrieved on March 2022 at AVL

design and architecture with often provocative contents.² The commissioner was Rebecca Gomperts*, a Dutch Physician and founder of the non-profit organization *Women on Waves (WoW)*.³ She discovered that abortion performed in international waters, 12 miles from the coast, could not be considered illegal by the targeted country, since national law would have applied on board a Dutch ship. Since the year of the foundation in 1999, *WOW* helped women living in countries where abortion was not legal performing safe termination of pregnancy in international waters and spreading awareness about the importance and the use of contraceptives.⁴



*Figure 3. Women on Waves ship leaving Den Helder, NL, for the third sea campaign in Portugal (2004)
Retrieved from official photo archive AVL on April 10th, 2022.*

While the Government in the Netherlands legalized abortion until the 21st week on November 1, 1984,⁵ approximately 25% of the world population still lives in countries with highly restrictive abortion laws, due to religious beliefs or societal restrictions.⁶ In 1869 Pope Pius IX declared that ensoulment occurs at conception, and as a result, the laws in the 19th century did not allow any termination of pregnancy. Between 1950 and 1985 almost all wealthy countries liberalized their

² Allen Jennifer, *Atelier Van Lieshout* (Rotterdam, NL: NAI Uitgevers, 2007).

³ "Art Projects," Women on Waves, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/2585/art-projects>.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Antonella F. Lavelanet et al., "Global Abortion Policies Database: A Descriptive Analysis of the Legal Categories of Lawful Abortion," *BMC International Health and Human Rights* 18, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-018-0183-1>.

⁶ "Poster of the Exhibition at the Witte de With Museum, Rotterdam." Women on Waves. (2001) Accessed March 6, 2022. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/>.

abortion laws for reasons of human rights and safety,⁷ but in many developing countries abortion is still not allowed. In front of a controversial topic such as the fight for abortion rights, the goal of this historical research is to tell the story of the *A-Portable*, an artwork that became a symbol of women's rights and an example of how art and political activism can be related to each other. The funding for the AVL's artwork was not provided by the Ministry of Health or any other medical organization. Women on Waves received the money from the *Mondriaan Fund*, a Dutch non-profit organization for visual art that helps artists and socially active organizations in the country.⁸

To formulate and answer the research question, I had the privilege of being in direct contact with the artist Joep Van Lieshout, as I am working for a 6-months architecture internship at AVL, starting in January and ending in July 2022. (Figure 4) Van Lieshout showed me the current location of the work so that I could observe it and take pictures of its current conditions. Thanks to the job, I also had the opportunity to access the original photo archive of the Atelier⁹ where I retrieved several pictures of the artwork and its exhibitions. About art and activism, many articles and books are accessible, such as the book "Art activism and Activism" by Katy Deepwell¹⁰ which provides much information about the historical phenomenon with many examples from the past millennium. To make comparisons and understand the concept of art activism more in-depth, I researched and included stories of other activist artists such as the balkan feminist performer Tanja Ostojić (1972), whose pioneering and provocative work was censored during the same Biennale 2001,¹¹ and Lori Brown (1969), an American architect who dedicated the last years of her career to the improvement of abortion clinics.¹² The actions of both women, as much as Rebecca Gomperts, represented a step forward in the debate about female rights. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain direct contact with Rebecca Gomperts or *WoW*, probably due to the number of requests that the organization receives every day from women seeking help from all over the world. However, the official website¹³ was a great source of historical information, together with the documentary "Vessel"¹⁴ which summarizes the events and campaigns of the organization from 1999, when it was founded, to 2014, the year of the movie's release.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ "Home," Mondriaan Fonds, March 6, 2022, <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/>.

⁹ Original photo archive of the Atelier, accessible from January 2022.

¹⁰ Deepwell, Katy. *Feminist art activism and activism* (2021) New York, Valiz Booksellers

¹¹ Tanjas Ostojić, "I'll be your angel" in *Venice Diary*, ed. Tihomir Milovac, exh. cat. Zagreb (Museum of Contemporary Art) 2002.

¹² "The Abortion Clinic Next Door," The Architectural League of New York, July 9, 2021, <https://archleague.org/article/the-abortion-clinic-next-door/>.

¹³ "Home," Mondriaan Fund, March 6, 2022, <https://www.mondriaanfonds.nl/en/home/>.

¹⁴ *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.



Figure 4. Picture of myself in working gear in the polyester room of AVL, wherein in 2000 the A-Portable was realized. Photography from March 30th, 2022.

The first chapter explains the history of *Women on Waves* and the first journeys of the *A-Portable* from 2001 to 2004. The second narrates the “artistic career” of the shipping container with its debut in galleries and exhibitions from 2000 to 2006, in between the activist campaigns. The last chapter aims to describe the dual relevance of the *A-Portable* as a piece of art, but also as a political symbol, and the relationship between the practices of art and activism in history. This theory will be supported by other examples of feminist art activists such as Tanja Ostojić (1972), and Lori Brown (1969).

Using the episodes of the campaigns of *WoW* as a form of performance to attract mediatic attention, this paper explains the essence of art activism and its ability to share awareness against inequality and hierarchical societal orders. Although most of the time it does not result in immediate effects as much as protests and strikes, art is a very powerful medium to create a deep change in society and people’s mentality, to create a better future for the next generations.

Joep Van Lieshout*



Figure 5. Joep Van Lieshout in his Atelier, 2019.
Retrieved on March 2nd, 2022 from
<https://seeallthis.com>

Atelier Van Lieshout was founded in 1995 by the sculptor, painter and visionary Joep Van Lieshout (1963). After graduating from the *Rotterdam Art Academy* (1985) Van Lieshout became a successful designer with projects that traveled all over the world. During his practice, he has established a multidisciplinary practice that produces works on the borders between art, design, and architecture. Provocation is a common characteristic of most of his artworks, such as the “urban plan” of *AVL-Ville*, realized in 2001. The project consisted in a series of tiny houses creating a free state in the Rotterdam harbor, with a minimum of rules, a maximum of liberties, and the highest degree of autarky. Also the *A-Portable* was exposed as part of this lively exhibition, attracting the public eye but also arising many criticisms. Van Lieshout combines an imaginative aesthetic and ethic with a spirit of entrepreneurship, and this international fame increases every day, till now.

Source: “Biography,” *Atelier Van Lieshout*, August 20, 2020.

Rebecca Gomperts*



Figure 6. Gomperts on board the Dutch clinic ship *Sea of Change* in 2001. The ship was preparing for a trip to Ireland. Retrieved on March 2nd, 2022 on
<https://www.theguardian.com>

Rebecca Gomperts (1966), Dutch Physician, is mostly known as the founder of the organization *WoW*. When she was eight years old, her mum brought her on a *Greenpeace* ship and this childhood experience always remained impressed in her memory. While studying at medical school, she already knew that she wanted to dedicate her career and her life to social justice. In the evenings she also attended the *Rietveld Academy of Art* in Amsterdam. After completing her training as an abortion doctor, Rebecca Gomperts went on board a *Greenpeace* ship to South America, where she met many women who greatly suffer both physically and psychologically - sometimes brought to death - due to unwanted pregnancies and lack of access to safe and legal abortion. In response to this medical calamity and to the lack of women’s freedom to decide upon their own bodies, Rebecca decided to found in Amsterdam, in 1999, the non-profit organization *Women on Waves*.

Source: *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014)

First Chapter

Women on Waves and the A-Portable.

At the turn of the new millennium, 20 million abortions per year were performed under illegal and unsafe conditions, resulting in the deaths of an estimated 100.000 women annually. In those years Rebecca Gomperts was sailing on *Greenpeace* ships and she came into direct contact with many women victims of these restrictive laws. Helping those women against the Government seemed to be very challenging, at the limit of the impossible, and the risks would have been very high. After a lot of research, she finally discovered that the applicability of national abortion laws extends only to territorial, but also to international waters. This meant that, outside a 12-mile radius from the coast, Dutch laws would have applied on board a Dutch ship. The name of the non-profit organization “Women on Waves” derives from their first and better-known campaigns, involving sea voyages to countries with restrictive abortion rules. In collaboration with AVL, WoW built the *A-Portable* abortion clinic to be placed on top of their ships, consisting of an enclosed space to perform the operation safely and offer emotional support to women going through such a delicate process.

Following the artist interviewed on March 14th, 2022: “I knew Rebecca Gomperts a little bit when she came to me with these ideas for a Portable Clinic. I liked the proposal, for several reasons. First of all, its ideology: everyone should be able to decide about their own life or death or children. Those are personal choices, and it shouldn’t be the government to tell me what to do. [...] I also liked the fact that the work would have sailed along borders. To give an example, it was a time when I wanted to feel free, and I made several kinds of “Mobile” structures so that I would not have had to apply for a building permit. Once you make a building and you put wheels under it, it is not considered a building, but it is considered a vehicle, and there is very little legislation around that. (Figure 7) [...] Trying to stretch the borders of the possible was a subject of my work, and in that sense, the *A-Portable* applied to my concept very much.”¹⁵ As mentioned by Joep in the interview, WOW took inspiration from the housing units that AVL used to build in those years and wanted to create an equally enclosed and safe space in which women could feel safe and protected from the non-abortion movements and governments. One of the many examples is the Modular House Mobile (Figure 7), realized by AVL in 1995, which also became part of the AVL-Ville Urban Plan in 2001.

¹⁵ Interview with Joep Van Lieshout, on March 14th 2022

Figure 7. *Modular House Mobile* (1995).
Tiny house with wheels from which WOW
took inspiration for the commission of the
A-Portable.

Today part of *Fondazione Prada*
Collection, Milan, Italy.

Picture retrieved on April, 10th 2022 from
www.ateliervanlieshout.com



From a theoretical and legal point of view, the medical procedure executed on board the ship would not evade any national law. However, the aim of the first chapter is to document the early history of the pro-abortion movement, describing how, when put into practice, the first sea campaigns received very strong opposition from the Governments and the local anti-abortion movements.

According to Dutch law, *Women on Waves* had to apply for a particular license to perform terminations after 45 days of pregnancy¹⁶. For this reason, Rebecca and Joep had to make sure that the *A-portable* treatment room would have been set up to comply with all the requirements for health and safety. During the interview, the artist declared that the design of the exteriors and the interiors were a result of a collaboration concerning a rigid list of medical and sanitary requirements.¹⁷ “Since it was a real abortion clinic, which had to be approved by the governmental Ministry of Health, it had to be hygienic and efficient (and not just what you see now in the basement of my exhibition room.)” He said while smiling. “Many things had to be designed: medical chairs, storage for equipment and to sterilize it, a toilet and changing rooms, and in particular it had to be electricity and water

¹⁶ Rosen, Carly. *Women on Waves, Ireland, and the abortion ship pilot mission (Women Leading Change* © Newcomb College Institute), 2016

¹⁷ Youtube., 2014. *The Abortion Ship - BBC newsnight* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6GapxqrdNw>

independent. [...]” The preliminary sketches from the official archives of the Atelier¹⁸ show some of the medical equipment, drawn by the artist. (Figures 8). From figure 8 it is possible to deduce that the white color of the exteriors of the shipping container had not been determined from the beginning since in the drawing the *A-Portable* is represented in light blue. “The final logo on the outside was the logo of *Women on Waves*, and for the color, both Rebecca and I just agreed on having a hospital tone, light green in the interiors, and white on the exteriors of the container.” (Figure 9)

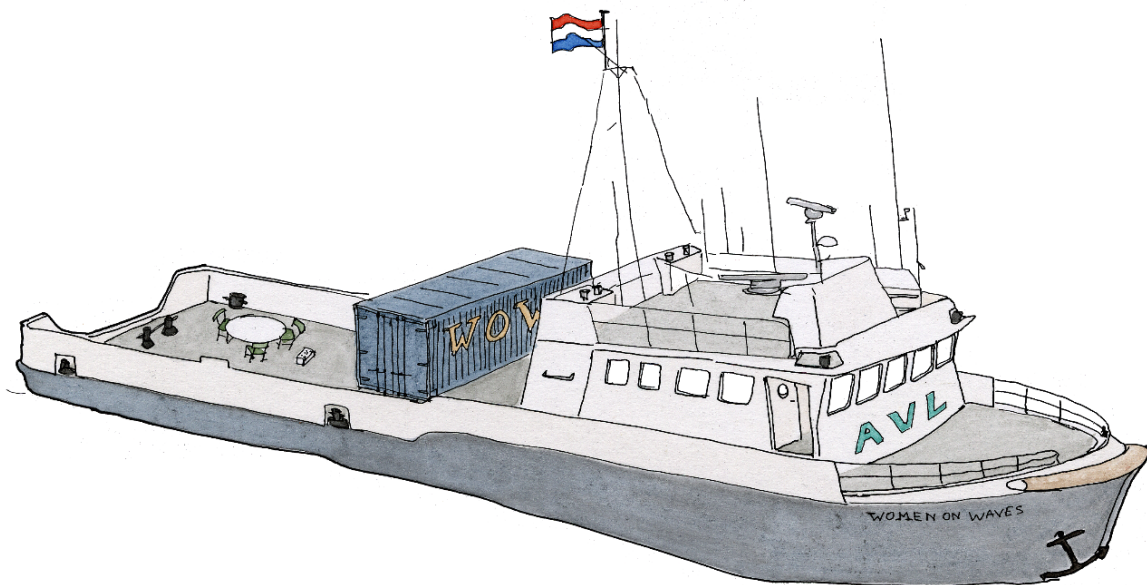


Figure 8. Original drawings by Joep Van Lieshout of A-Portable on the Women on Waves ship. When the drawing was realized, the colour of the shipping container had not been determined yet. Retrieved from AVL archive on March 2022

¹⁸ Original photo archive of the Atelier, accessible from January 2022.



Figure 9. Picture of two women acting as doctors and patient inside the abortion clinic, shows the interior furniture and the medical equipment of the A-Portable. Retrieved from AVL archive on March 2022

The application for the medical license was sent in March 2001, and created a big debate in the Dutch Parliament, with many questions posed by members of the Christian parties, for which the decision of the Ministry of Health was postponed till the end of June.¹⁹ In the meantime, *Women on Waves* had made some agreements with the *Dublin Abortion Rights Group* and *Cork Women's Right to Choose Group* to sail to the Republic of Ireland, a European country with very restrictive abortion rules in Europe.²⁰ Responding to the invitation of the two Irish movements for abortion and women's rights, they set the date of departure on June 11th, 2001, hoping to receive the license on time. On the departure date, with the participation of more than 100 volunteers, the shipping container was placed on the first ship and set sail from the Netherlands to the Republic of Ireland. But during the two-day-long journey, *Women on Waves* received the disappointing answer that the approval of the Dutch Ministry of Health would have been given only three weeks after their arrival in the Irish Harbor. Despite the bad news, meaning the incapability of performing clinical abortions onboard, Rebecca Gomperts pushed the crew to continue the journey and was welcomed by the fellow Irish associations for women's rights. The picture below (Figure 10) shows two local Irish women holding some propaganda signs, manifesting against the restrictive laws of their country in the port. On their propaganda sign, the women wrote the two short phrases in

¹⁹ Youtube., 2014. The Abortion Ship - BBC newsnight <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6GapxqrdNw>

²⁰ *Vessel*, *Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

Irish “Céad míle fáilte” meaning ‘A hundred thousand welcome’ and “Fáilte roimh”, translated as “You welcome”. In Ireland, the abortion law was changed only in 2018, seventeen years later, thanks to the support of the Irish abortion rights organizations.



Figure 10. Two Irish Women holding signs during the Women on Wave's first campaign, in 2001. Retrieved from womenonwaves.org, on Dec. 2021

The numerous staff was trained to provide women with information to prevent unwanted pregnancies through the use of contraceptives and empower them to make conscious decisions about family planning. All women were allowed to visit the boat, where doctors and medical staff organized several workshops about reproductive health issues, together with the local pro-abortion groups. As a result, the first mission of the *A-Portable* consisted of a huge mediatic performance, as it was covered by international media such as *BBC World*²¹ and *CNN*.²² In five days, more than 300 calls were received and answered by the hotline on board the ship, used as a symbol for the exchange of information and expertise and as a platform to create dialogue and reflection about issues of choice.²³ One year later, in June 2002, the Dutch Minister of Health, Els Borst, finally ascertained that the floating women's health clinic could provide the abortion pill for very early abortions on board a Dutch ship.²⁴

²¹ Youtube., 2014. The Abortion Ship - BBC newsnight <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l6GapxqrdNw>

²² “Abortion Ship Ireland 2001,” Women on Waves, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.womenonwaves.org/nl/page/769/abortion-ship-ireland-2001>.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

The following list summarizes the chronological history of the organization from its foundation till 2014 when the documentary “Vessel”²⁵ was published. The next part of the chapter will explain the most necessary to contextualize and answer the research question.

Chronology of *WoW*:

1999: Foundation Year

11 June 2001: First campaign in the Republic of Ireland (with *A-Portable*)

Without a license, *WoW* could not perform any clinical abortion but provided abortion pills and information for Irish women.

Abortion in Ireland was legalized in 2018.

2003: Second campaign in Poland (with *A-Portable*)

At the time, from 18'000 to 20'000 illegal abortions were performed in Poland every year. *WoW* managed to provide abortion to a few women, who became a symbol of freedom for others.

Abortion in Poland is still considered illegal in April 2022.

2004: Third campaign in Portugal (with *A-Portable*)

The Portuguese government sent two warships to the border so that *WoW* could not enter national waters. However, Rebecca appears on public Portuguese television, announcing the effectiveness and the availability in pharmacies of the abortion pills. For the first time, she mentioned her private experience of abortion.

*Abortion in Ireland is legalized in 2006, two years after the *WoW*'s campaign.*

In the same year *WoW* realized the importance of media and decided to **change strategy**: the governments could stop the ships, but not the telecommunication and the internet.

2004: Travel to Ecuador (No ship)

WoW created a hotline and trains local organizations such as *Youth and Gender Coalition* to assist women to perform their own abortions with the pill. To attract the public eye, they occupied the big statue of the Virgin of Panecillo.

Abortion in Ecuador is still considered illegal in April 2022.

2005: Foundation of *Women on Web*

WoW started to help women through internet campaigns. Through this service, they could get information about abortion and online consultation with a doctor, who would send a package with the pill via post at their address.

²⁵ *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

2008: campaign in Spain (Smaller ship without A-Portable)

Few symbolic abortions were performed.

Abortion in Ireland was legalized in 2010, two years after the WoW's campaign.

2009: Travel to Tanzania (No ship)

WoW organized silent training for local women to help each other, holding conferences and workshops in the *Women's Promotion Center*.

In **2012**, WoW volunteers responded to over 100'000 emails from 135 countries requesting information about abortion with pills. Women would seek help also in some countries where abortion was legal, such as the USA, since they couldn't afford the health insurance to perform this expensive clinical practice.

In **2014** WoW collaborated on training in 23 countries and continues to train local groups around the world.

Source: Vessel, Vessel the Film (Netflix, 2014)

After the first campaign in Ireland, *Women on Waves* succeeded in performing abortions on only a few women, in Poland (2004) and Spain (2008).²⁶ During their third campaign in 2006, the crew attempted to reach Portugal, but they were stopped before entering national waters by two warships, visible in Figure 11.



Figure 11. The A-Portable on the WoW ship, sailing to Portugal is blocked before entering national waters by two army ships. Retrieved from <https://www.ateliervanlieshout.com/news/radical-seafaring>, on December 2021

²⁶ Youtube., 2013. HARDtalk Rebecca Gomperts Women on Waves

Despite the unsuccess in entering the Harbor, the mobilization of military defenses by the Government attracted a lot of attention from the media, resulting in an unexpected success for *WoW*. Rebecca Gomperts was invited to National Portuguese television, on the talk show *SIC 10 horas*, in a show titled “Face to Face Abortion Boat, where she had the opportunity to announce the effectiveness and the availability in pharmacies of the abortion pills.”²⁷ For the first time, she also publicly mentioned her private experience of abortion in the past, to evoke people’s sensibility and empathy. In the present time, 2022, Rebecca happily gave birth and raised two children.²⁸

The Portuguese campaign consisted of the last maritime journey of the *A-Portable*, which was brought back to the Netherlands and continued its career in the art field. Not many abortions could be performed on board, but as Rebecca Gomperts said in an interview in 2016 “The “A-Portable” and the few women that could perform an abortion on board became a great symbol of freedom and women’s rights. After the campaigns, many women from all over the world contacted us via email, asking *Where is the ship? How can I perform an abortion?*”²⁹ In order to help the biggest possible number of women, *Women on Waves* decided to change its strategy. Initially, the organization started delivering abortion pills with drones from Germany to Poland, and consequently sending them around the world via mail. In those years, the internet had become a worldwide phenomenon and resulted to be the best way to help women through the online medical and psychological assistance of doctors and specialists. *Women on Web* was founded in 2005, with the idea that individual women would have been able to perform their abortion, once received a package with the pill via post at their address. Together with the internet campaigns and the several information in 15 languages made available on the official website www.womenonwaves.org, the organization has collaborated on word of mouth training in many countries such as Ecuador (2004) and Tanzania (2009) and is still active nowadays.

Making a huge step forward for the history of female abortion rights, the staff and collaborators of *Women on Waves* put a lot of energy into this revolutionary project, and have been able to successfully change their strategy several times, according to new necessities and policies of different countries.

²⁷ “Live on Television,” *Women on Waves*, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.womenonwaves.org/en/page/608/live-on-television>.

²⁸ *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

²⁹ YouTube., 2016. Dare the im_possible: Interview mit Dr. Rebecca Gomperts <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDm0RQacFUw>.

How to use the abortion pill:

The most effective way (95% effectiveness) to have an abortion via a pill is using 2 different pills: *Mifepristone* and *Misoprostol*. They are both available in countries where abortion is illegal, but women don't know about their effects. *Misoprostol* by itself is also the most effective (85%). The women have to take in a total of 8 pills, in two different periods. After the somministration, they will experience discomfort and cramps, as a normal reaction of the body.

WoW assist women who are going through this procedure online or on the phone, and provides them with suggestions and psychological help.

Source: "Campaigns and Information about Safe Abortion Pills." *Women on Waves*. Accessed March 16, 2022. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/>.



Figure 12. Rebecca Gomperts sailing in the Harbour in Valencia (2009) in front of a violent and numerous crowd of opposition. Screenshot from documentary *Vessel* retrieved on March 6th, 2022.

Second Chapter

The debut of the Abortion Clinic into the art scene

The challenges of the maritime campaigns played a big role in the development of the idea and the action of *Women on Waves*, which since its foundation in 1999 researched alternative strategies to act and share awareness about women's rights. Also in countries where abortion was considered legal, there was a relevant stigma around abortion, since it had always been considered a taboo topic. *WOW's* goal consisted also in breaking that stigma and normalizing it. As with any other normal medical procedure, it should have been considered part of a women's life.³⁰ To create public awareness, *WoW's* goal consisted in transcending boundaries; not only between countries but also between different professional domains such as law, medicine, seafaring, art, and literature. In addition to the activist campaigns, visual art and new media but also fashion, and the film became important means to create empathy towards the topic.³¹ The physician, who earned a degree in art at the *Rietveld Academy* in Amsterdam before going on to attend medical school,³² interpreted the missions of the Abortion ship as art performances that could be exposed in several galleries, together with other artworks focusing on the topic. The purpose of getting involved in the art world wasn't just to draw attention to the matter of women's rights but to make changes and give people choices, raising money to start the campaigns. "We've always been interested in the link between activism and art," says Kinja Manders, project manager for *Women on Waves* "and in finding creative and conceptual solutions that are on the edge."³³ The design was first presented in 2000 at the *Witte de With Museum*, in combination with informative posters about the topics of safe abortion and pregnancy prevention.³⁴ Later, *Women on Waves* gained even more international recognition and started to participate in art exhibitions and shows around the world. Undoubtedly, the exhibition which reached most of the international press was the participation in the 49th edition of the Venice Biennale. During this International

³⁰ YouTube., 2016. Dare the im_possible: Interview mit Dr. Rebecca Gomperts
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDm0RQacFUw>.

³¹ Willem Velthoven, "Women on Waves," Mediamatic, accessed April 10, 2022,
<https://www.mediamatic.net/en/page/8963/women-on-waves>.

³² "Rebecca Gomperts." Framer Framed, December 24, 2020.
<https://framerframed.nl/en/mensen/rebecca-gomperts/>.

³³ Ctdadmin. "Women on Waves - Thecube Project Space." TheCube Project Space - 本空間由國藝會、台北市文化局、RC文化藝術基金會、陳泊文先生等贊助營運, March 3, 2022.
<https://thecubespace.com/en/uncategorized-en/women-on-waves/>.

³⁴ "Poster of the Exhibition at the Witte de With Museum, Rotterdam." Women on Waves. Accessed March 6, 2022. <http://www.womenonwaves.org/>.

Art exhibition which takes place in the city every two years since 1895³⁵ and is one of the most important fairs in the world, the shipping container was placed in the waters of the Arsenale exhibition space, on top of a floating structure. (Figure 13)³⁶



Figure 13. *The Floating Clinic Shipping container in the Waters of Arsenale, at Biennale Venice 2001.*

Retrieved from official source: A archives of Atelier Van Lieshout., on January 2022

After the collaboration with AVL, WoW, together with the Dutch designer Willem Velthoven (1958), created several interactive installations and a clothing project. The four installations, named *Portrait Collector*, *Sea*, *I Had An Abortion*, and *Every 6 Minutes* were presented in the *Mediamatic Women on Waves show*, and at the *Biennale* of Thessaloniki 2003.³⁷ The exhibition poster below (Figure 14) was part of the project *Every 6 Minutes*, in which the curators wanted people to be aware of the incredible number of women victims of unsafe abortion around the world. In 2003, 80 thousand women would die every year due to illegal pregnancy interruption, meaning one woman every 6 minutes.

³⁵ "History." La Biennale di Venezia, January 27, 2022. <https://www.labiennale.org/en/history>.

³⁶ Bonetti, David (October–November 2001). "The Venice Biennale 2001". *Art New England*. **22** (6): 16–17. ISSN 0274-7073.

³⁷ Willem Velthoven, "Women on Waves," Mediamatic, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://www.mediamatic.net/en/page/8963/women-on-waves>.

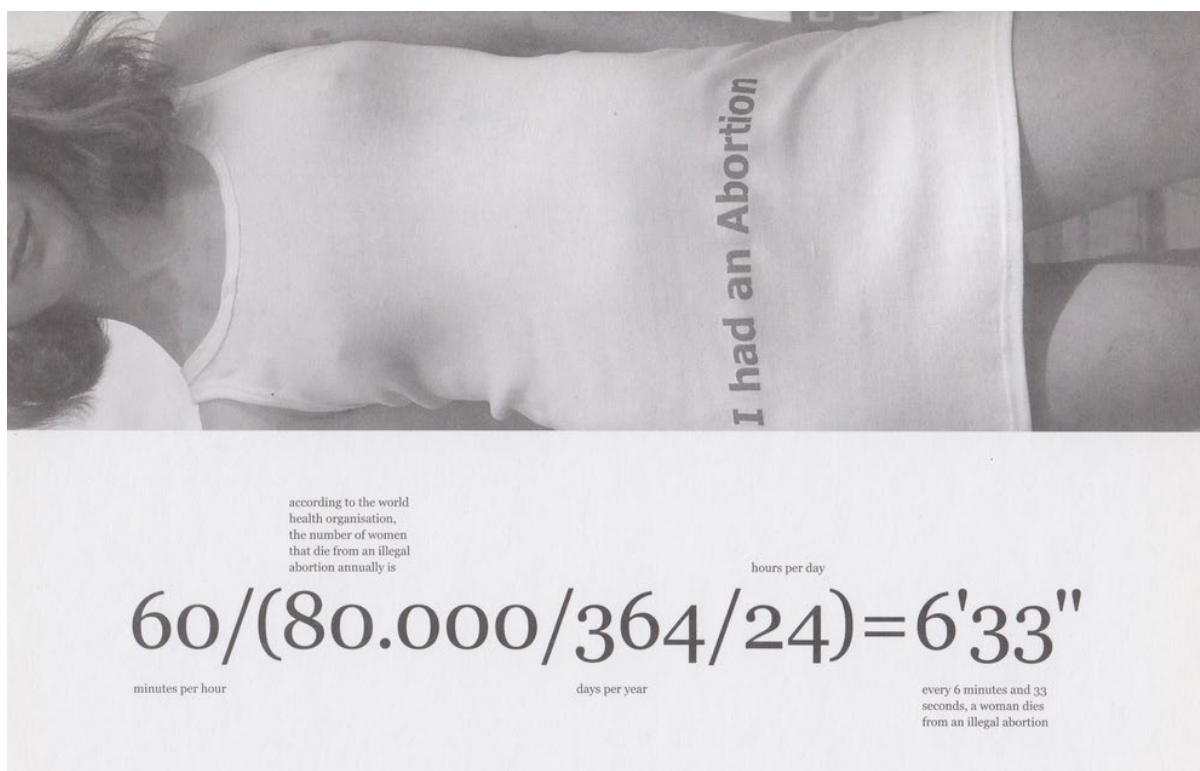


Figure 14. Poster for Exhibition "Every 6 minutes" by Rebecca Gomperts and Willem Velthoven, 12 July 2003. Retrieved on April 10th, 2022 from www.mediamatic.net

In summer 2003 the *Mediamatic Supermarkt* entrance was blocked with the *A-Portable*, and this last installation consisted at the end of *Women on Waves* exhibitions.³⁸ For the first and last time, viewers walk into the portable container that was transformed into an abortion clinic and sailed across international waters. After its worldwide journeys, today the *A-Portable* lies in the backyard of the Atelier, stacked on top of other shipping containers and weathering under the rain and the weather. After the last exhibition, it was donated to the *Boijmans Museum* in Rotterdam, but the directors declared not to have enough space in the storage, so it was returned to the artist. "Now it's there, unfortunately, but we should bring it back to a place which is indoor and dry. Maybe, one day, we will expose it again."

After mentioning the several art campaigns organized by *Women on Waves*, another aspect of the research is to understand the artist's point of view and the meaning that the artwork represented for the image and reputation of the Atelier. During the interview, Van Lieshout mentioned that the *A-Portable* was a controversial piece, and received a lot of critics from

³⁸ Ibid.

members of religious and anti-abortion movements.³⁹ It was realized in the same year of the “AVL Ville” project when the artist filled the garden next to the atelier with tiny shipping containers-houses and declared an independent state inside Rotterdam, where Dutch laws were not applied. (Figure 15) The 36-years old Van Lieshout and the staff lived in the shipping containers, including the abortion clinic, till the police shut down the experiment, almost one year later. According to the founder, there were many reasons why the government would create opposition against the state, but certainly, the political connotation of the *Women on Waves* abortion chamber was one of the main obstacles, due to religious members of the parliament.

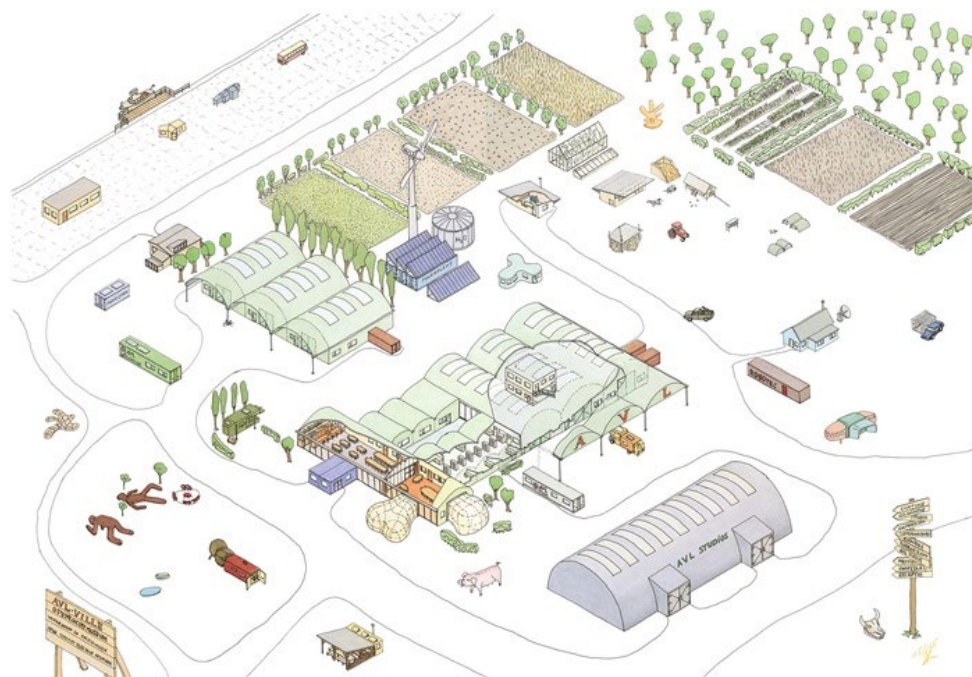


Figure 15. Drawing of Urban Plan of AVL-Ville by Joep Van Lieshout. Retrieved on March 5th 2022 from www.ateliervanlieshout.com

When describing the *A-Portable* as a successful example of art activism, two critiques could be raised against this thesis. First, Joep Van Lieshout himself defines his art as “a-political” and during his artistic practice has always been distancing himself from any type of political activism. How is it possible to consider his work part of an activist campaign?

Despite the fact that the artist considers his art “a-moral” and detached from politics, his interest goes towards society and the improvement of people’s behavior. In this case, for example, he decided to collaborate with Rebecca since he shared her ideas about women’s freedom to choose for their own lives and bodies. When asked if he believed that his art could change the world, he answered “I think that art is communication, and it is made to transmit ideas, however not in a

³⁹ Interview with Joep Van Lieshout, on March 14th 2022

very direct way. For example, if you say: “Let’s go to *Albert Heijn* [most popular brand of supermarket in the Netherlands] and take away all the meat products”, that’s very direct action. For me, the solution would maybe be to create food that doesn’t need meat so that people in a more subconscious way will think about that. Art can involve change, but some art does not at all. Some art is very traditional, some others very political, while mine is critical towards society, towards humans, and how we behave. It is more about society than politics, I would say, about the way that people behave and what we do with our world. My strategy is to make contrasts and exaggerate certain things, bring them to the extreme: I create large contradictions so that people are forced to rethink the situation.”⁴⁰ This strategy to raise critical questions and create empathy towards the topic of abortion was adopted and strengthened by *WoW*, not only inside the art system but outside it, in reality, itself. As demonstrated through this extraordinary reference project, both art and activism can both be used to make a long-term change in people’s mentality, in two completely different, but effective ways.

The second critique that could be raised is the evidence that the A-Portable was realized in the Netherlands, a wealthy country that could afford to spend public money on art and culture. Wealthier countries are generally the ones in which abortion is more likely to be legal, and people visiting museums are already partially aware of the topic of legal abortion and the importance of contraceptives. Often in these countries, activist artists perform their works in front of an activist crowd, which is already prepared and agrees with the abolition of laws against abortion. In the rest of the world, in more impoverished countries or under authoritarian regimes which restrict people’s freedom, these manifestations would not be possible as activist art does not have the main center in society. This can be because bigger problems still exist and they have to be solved in more practical and direct ways, or it is a consequence of the fact that artists are subjected to authority. Art against injustice still exists and it is even more powerful in these countries, but needs to remain hidden and underground, since there is no platform to manifest it, or can be considered illegal. ⁴¹ In contrast, the *Mondrian Funding* for culture is very important in liberal countries such as the Netherlands and this gave a chance to Women on Waves to develop and exhibit their works. ⁴² But if activist art in museums targets only an activist crowd, Rebecca Gomperts, who studies art before becoming a physician and doctor, brings art also outside the academic

⁴⁰ Interview with Joep Van Lieshout, on March 14th 2022

⁴¹ “Art Activism - All You Need to Know: St-Art Amsterdam.” April 29, 2021. Retrieved on March 12th 2022 <https://st-artamsterdam.com/art-activism/>.

⁴² “The Art of Change: Women on Waves Activist Art Org.” The Art Story Blog, August 4, 2020. <https://www.theartstory.org/blog/the-art-of-change-women-on-waves-activist-art-org/>.

institutions, as the show performed by *Women on Waves* can be considered as an extreme and meticulously organized example of performance art. She discovered that in international waters she would have been able to perform abortions for women all over the world and she decided to break international boundaries to help other women. As Boris Groys states in his essay “On art Activism,”⁴³ most art activists, such as Rebecca, try to change living conditions outside of their comfort area, in economically underdeveloped areas, raise ecological concerns, offer access to culture and education for the populations of poor countries and regions, attract attention to the plight of illegal immigrants, improve the conditions of people working in art institutions, and so forth. To do this, new revolutionary strategies are used, moving forward in respect to the traditional forms of art. Katy Deepwell, in the book “Feminist art activism and activism”⁴⁴, mentions and analyzes many different types of art activism, enumerated in the text box below.

Types of art activism:

- Monuments and memorials
- Art History (ex: queer historiography)
- Performances (theatre, gallery, street)
- Participatory and socially engaged projects
- Writing about art
- Documentaries
- Phototherapy
- Poster Campaigns
- Others

Considering these forms of art, *WoW* has used different artistic strategies to move public opinions, such as public performances, socially engaged projects, and poster campaigns, and the organization was also the protagonist of the documentary *Vessel*, distributed by Netflix in 2014.⁴⁵ All these different forms of mobilization used by Rebecca Gomperts and the organization aim to make art inclusive and take into consideration the biggest possible target, sharing it not only in cultural institutions such as museums and theaters but also in public spaces all over the world.

⁴³ Groys, Boris “On Art Activism” Accessed January 18, 2022. http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_8984545.pdf

⁴⁴ Deepwell, Katy. *Feminist art activism and activism*: New York, Valiz Booksellers, 2021

⁴⁵ *Vessel*, *Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

Third Chapter

Art and feminist activism in history

After describing the case of the A-Portable as an important historical step towards women's emancipation, it is important to understand it in its historical background, and not consider the emergency of WoW as a stand-alone episode. In order to do this, the third and last chapter will briefly summarize the history of art activism, and in particular feminist practice. Two further examples of how art and architecture have been used as a form of activism will be mentioned, finding similarities with the work of AVL.

In art history or art criticism, creating art has been frequently presented as “taking a position”, manifesting a viewpoint held by the artist in terms of sympathies or identifications, even when there are many ambiguities, complexities, or multi-layered meanings in how the artwork is written about and understood⁴⁶. In the past, most artists used to work for powerful figures, such as a king, religious leaders, or a dictator, and for this reason, they were strongly influenced and censored. In modernity in which freedom of expression and protest against authority has become more popular, social and political issues have become an important source of inspiration for contemporary art, and many modern artists consider themselves “art activists”⁴⁷. While its concept has older roots, the term *artivism* was first used in the 1990s. In the same years, the Suffragist movement started to demonstrate this complex dialectical relationship between art and politics⁴⁸ and was followed by many other feminist activists. A hundred years later, the last decade of the twentieth century has been frequently characterized in terms of a division between academic forms of feminism, such as gender studies, and activism outside the University, as protests and collective events in the public spaces.⁴⁹ Finally, art is used together with activism aims to change situations to reach idealistic goals, and create an *effect* on society and people's lives.⁵⁰ In 2022, a lot of progress towards abortion rights has been made in wealthy countries and the taboo around abortion is slowly being abolished from people's mentality, thanks to the fights

⁴⁶ “Art Activism - All You Need to Know: St-Art Amsterdam.” April 29, 2021. Retrieved on March 12th 2022 <https://st-artamsterdam.com/art-activism/>.

⁴⁷ Diana Coole “Feminism without nostalgia” *Radical Philosophy* 83 (May June 1997) Page 17-24

⁴⁸ . “The Art of Change: Women on Waves Activist Art Org.” *The Art Story Blog*, August 4, 2020. <https://www.theartstory.org/blog/the-art-of-change-women-on-waves-activist-art-org/>.

⁴⁹ Deepwell, Katy. “Introduction.” *Essay*. In *Feminist Art Activism and Artivism* 1, 1st ed., 1:9–20. Plural. Amsterdam, NL: Valiz, 2020.

⁵⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces*, art and research studio. Pag 12 book)

for freedom of many feminist activists. In 2001 though, when the A-Portable, the situation in Europe was not the same and the anti-abortion movements used to have more members and support from people.

In the art world, the 49th edition of the Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition, with the name *Plateau of Humankind* - represented a historical turning point, since it registered the largest participation of foreign countries (63) and a record for the number of visitors (243,000) over the previous 20 years.⁵¹ It was directed, like the 1999 edition, by the Swiss critic Harald Szeemann who said that “No set theme was applied in choosing the artists; indeed, it is their work which decides the dimension of the event. The Venice Biennale hopes to serve as a raised platform offering a view over humankind”. The initial idea for the name of the edition though was the title “Plateau of Mankind”, with a strong patriarchal connotation. In response to this, the performance artist Tanja Ostojić proposed to rename it “Plateau of Humankind” as a step towards gender equality, without asking to be credited for it. The director Harald Szeemann approved the request, even if she got the impression that he accepted her proposal with an artistic intention without giving it too much thought.⁵²

Tanja Ostojić was an artist born in Belgrad (1972), whose performance work draws inspiration from her own experience as a non-European Union citizen, a traveler, and a female artist. Born in Serbia, she also lived in Slovenia, France, and Germany, but refuses to claim any particular nationality. Despite their different origin, it is possible to draw a comparison between Tanja and Rebecca Gomperts, because both women dedicated their life and career to the fight for feminist ideals, to make the world a better place, not just for themselves but for the international community.



Figure 16. Manifesto of Venice Biennale 2001 - Plateau of Humankind. Retrieved on March 12th 2022

⁵¹ Bonetti, David (2001). "The Venice Biennale 2001". *Art New England*. **22** (6): 16–17.

⁵² On the Development of Interdisciplinary Feminist Methodologies and Perspectives within my own Artistic practice - I'll be your angel (2001) by Tanja Ostojić

In 2001, the same year in which AVL exhibited the *A-Portable* in the Venice Arsenale's waters, Tanja was invited to participate in the International exhibition by the director. However, her work ended up being considered too controversial and she could not perform it in front of the public.⁵³ In an extraordinarily clever way, during the opening days, she used the same director as the main material for her art exhibition and offered him to be his escort, to make him perform in public a pure patriarchist behavior. As a reaction, she published a video documenting the performance *I'll be your angel*, in which she accompanies Mr. Szeemann during the opening days around Venice (including cocktails, dinners, and press conferences).⁵⁴ The director immediately censored the content of the video and answered in a private letter: "I want that Biennale piece remains limited in time and use, no more quotes about your upcoming works, no more cuts in video and text. The Biennale is over and belongs to the past."⁵⁵ Tanja Ostojić deserves recognition as a relevant art activist at the Venice Biennale 2001. Her non-European origins represented an additional challenge for having an impact on the art world, as she was undoubtedly a strong and important character that made a difference in the fight for women's rights through art. She wrote that to make art "Provocation is a specialty of mine. My experience tells me that while art cannot quickly change social or political reality, it is important not to be apolitical. My need for direct communication led me into using my body and personality as a medium for artworks."⁵⁶

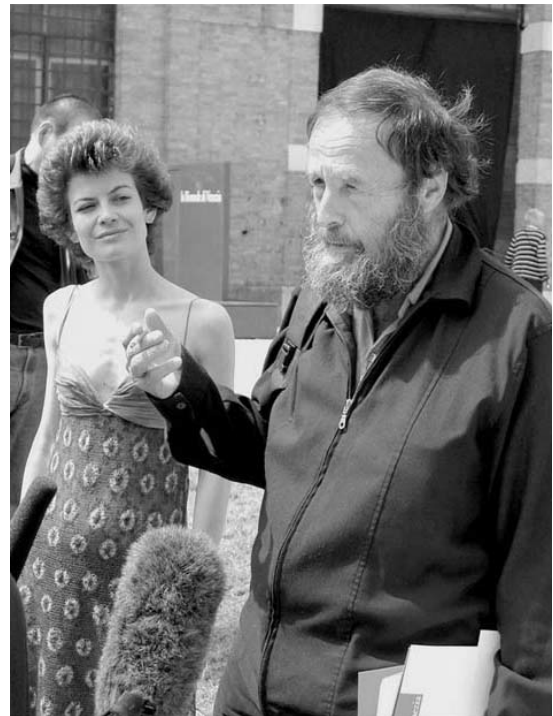


Figure 17. Tanja Ostojić looking at Harald Szeemann being interviewed by the press at the Venice Biennale 2001. From www.manchesterhive.com

⁵³ Tanjas Ostojić, *I'll be Your Angel*", in *La Biennale di Venezia: 49. Esposizione Nazionale d'Arte*, eds. Harald Szeemann and Cecilia Liveriero Lavelli, exh. cat. Venice 2001, pp. 274-275

⁵⁴ Tanjas Ostojić, "I'll be your angel" in *Venice Diary*, ed. Tihomir Milovac, exh. cat. Zagreb (Museum of Contemporary Art) 2002.

⁵⁵ Szeemann, Harald. Letter to Tanja Ostojić. Kassel, Germany: Documenta art exhibition, June 6, 2002.

⁵⁶ Tanjas Ostojić, "I'll be your angel" in *Venice Diary*, ed. Tihomir Milovac, exh. cat. Zagreb (Museum of Contemporary Art) 2002.

The action of *WoW* and the performance of Tanja took place in the same years, and share the same ideals of women's rights in their lives and body. The artist and the organization chose a similar way of performing and surprising the public, to create a strong reaction in front of the public eye, stimulating people's empathy and rational thinking about feminist ideas. Both "artistic" experiments can be considered pioneering since they happened in a historical time in which the stigma around abortion was still very strong and the taboo still existed in Europe.

Regarding the architectural features and qualities of the *A-Portable* designed by Van Lieshout, another comparison can be drawn with the American Feminist architect Lori Brown (1969), who in the last years of her career focused on the architectural qualities of abortion clinics and their surroundings.⁵⁷ Lori Brown is co-founder of *ArchiteXX*, a group dedicated to transforming the architecture profession for women, and she is particularly known for the book "Contested Spaces: Abortion Clinics, Women's Shelters and Hospitals exploring highly securitized spaces and the impact of legislation and the First Amendment's effect upon such places (2013)."⁵⁸ In the book, she formulates theories about how to improve abortion clinics for the mental and physical health of women and proposes solutions for the already existing ones. In a Lecture about Architect's responsibilities at *Iowa State University* (2019), she mentions that all architecture is political, as much as planning codes and regulations. After working for years in big companies and male-dominated office environments, she decided to make a change in her profession and use her architectural expertise to improve society and women's life.



Figure 18. Portrait of Lori Brown, retrieved on www.architecturalrecord.com on April 14th 2022

⁵⁷ Katie McDonough, "Making Abortion Clinics Beautiful: Meet the Architect Changing How We View Them," Salon (Salon.com, December 24, 2014), https://www.salon.com/2014/12/26/making_abortion_clinics_beautiful_meet_the_architect_changing_how_we_view_them/.

⁵⁸ Lori A. Brown, *Contested Spaces: Abortion Clinics, Women's Shelters and Hospitals: Politicizing the Female Body* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

Since 1976, abortion is a legal medical practice in all U.S. states, and every state has at least one abortion clinic.⁵⁹ However, it consists of a very expensive intervention, which many women still can't afford. Moreover, in 2013, when Lori Brown wrote the book "Contested Spaces" abortion was a controversial political issue, and regular attempts to restrict it occurred in most states, especially where the no-abortion movements were very strong and violent, such as in Texas and Louisiana.⁶⁰ Hoping to start correcting this imbalance and the taboo of abortion in American society, Brown worked on the improvement of two abortion clinics in the USA: The *Alabama State Clinic* in Huntsville and the *Jackson Women's Health Organization hospital*, in Mississippi State.⁶¹ In the first design, the architect had to assure that the clinics should have been in a good mixed-zoning neighborhood, which included houses and a new high school building. "She wanted this to be respectful, wanted it to engage the community, be something that the community would not see as an eyesore,"⁶² In the second clinic in Jackson, she proposed a barrier wall whose composite slats were enhanced by an embedded irrigation system near designated protest zones.⁶³ Additional benefits of including a thick wall and landscaping on both sides. The mass and vegetation would obstruct the noise of protesters coming from the sidewalks and create a nice green parking area around the clinic. The architectural diagram in the next page (Figure 19) is part of a series of drawings that show social aspects, such as the location of public pressure, which are often erroneously neglected in architecture. The main goal of Lori Brown is to demonstrate how politics and architecture of spaces are deeply connected, and through her multidisciplinary practice tries to create a better environment for women who are going through the difficult physical and psychological process of performing an abortion.

⁵⁹ The Lancet, "Abortion in the USA," *The Lancet* 377, no. 9763 (2011): p. 354, [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(11\)60112-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(11)60112-8).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "The Abortion Clinic Next Door," The Architectural League of New York, July 9, 2021, <https://archleague.org/article/the-abortion-clinic-next-door/>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

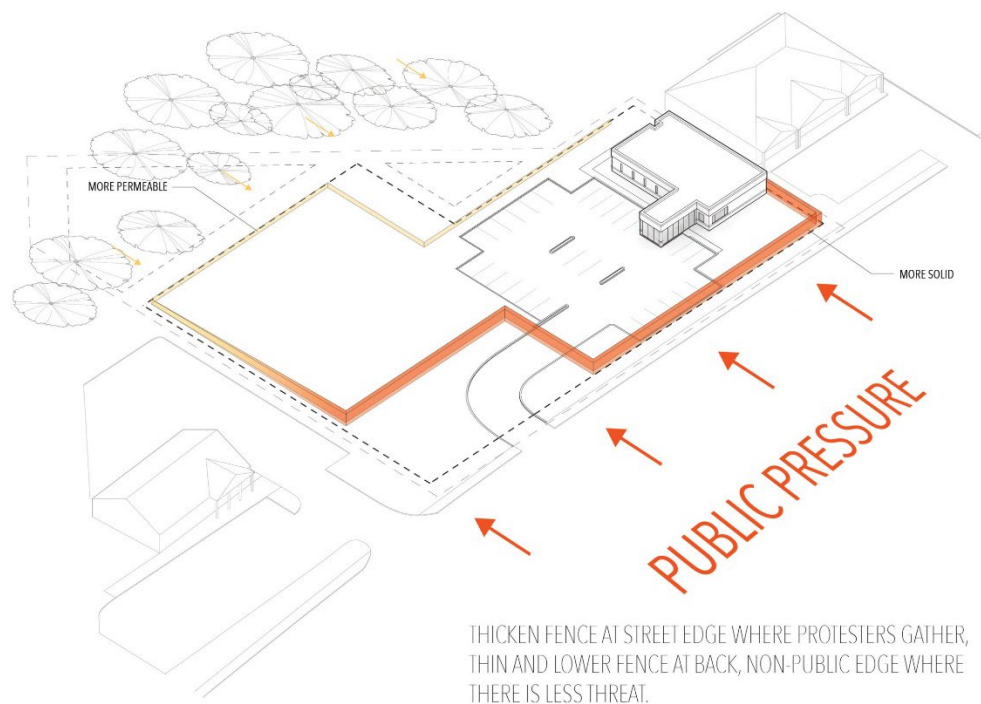


Figure 19. Architectural Diagram of the Jackson Women's Clinic in Mississippi building, showing the location of protesters and public pressure around the clinic.

As previously mentioned, from the Suffragist movements till the current days there has been a gradual improvement in terms of Women's emancipation in the history of wealthier countries, and more slowly also in the less developed areas of the world. However, both Rebecca Gomperts and Lori Brown were aware of the fact that the elimination of stigmas around abortion would have been a long process taking several years. It would have been unrealistic to hope for a sudden revolution in people's mentality towards the topic since societal trends are deeply rooted in people's minds. In the meantime, the feminist architect as much as Joep Van Lieshout for *WoW* used their artistic and architectural expertise to create a welcoming and safe space for women victims of the restricting rules of traditionalistic societies and governments. While providing them a personal interior space, their action also aimed to impress the public eye and strike people's interest in the topic. Differently, in other areas such as Africa and less developed countries around the world, the strategy of public advertisement could not be used, since going against the governments would have represented a risk to the life and safety of *WoW*'s activists. For this reason, the organization created several safe spaces for women, such as the improvement of the *Women's Promotion Center* in Tanzania in 2009.⁶⁴ In these shelters, women could participate in informative conferences and receive clinical and psychological help from experts.

⁶⁴ *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

Figure 20. Women promotion Center in Tanzania. Photo posted on July 5th 2020 on www.twitter.com, retrieved on March 4th 2022.



To conclude, the architectural and artistic practices mentioned in this chapter share one common ideal: revolutionizing public and private spaces to create change in society and a better environment for women. In the public sphere, *WoW* and Tanja Ostojčić, 2001, made an artistic performance to evoke people’s empathy and sensibility. In the private, Joep Van Lieshout in 2001 and Lori Brown, from 2013 onward, used their design and architectural expertise to create safe interior spaces, where women could find help and a shelter against the opposition of anti-abortion movements and governments.

Conclusion

The topic of this historical research is to understand and explain the connection between artistic and architectural practices and the history of feminist activism. In order to do this, the paper analyzed as the main reference the *A-Portable* Abortion Clinic designed in 2000 by the Dutch artist Joep Van Lieshout for the activist organization *Women on Waves (WoW)*. While searching for a solution to help women living in countries where abortion was not legal, the founder Rebecca Gomperts discovered that national abortion laws would have applied also on board a Dutch ship in international waters (12 miles away from the coast). For this reason, *WoW* organized several sea campaigns to perform a safe abortion and commissioned Van Lieshout the design an abortion clinic to be placed on top of their ship. This artwork became a very important historical symbol of women's emancipation, and at the same time symbolized an interior and private space where women could feel safe and protected from the public pressure of restrictive authorities or members of anti-abortion movements.

The movable abortion clinic is not a stand-alone example in the history of feminism, and since the 19th century with the suffragist movements, art has been frequently used as a medium by feminist activists. The phenomenon of "art activism", which name was first coined in the 1990s, describes the use of artistic practice with two main goals, deeply connected. The first consists of sharing public awareness and stimulating people's empathy toward critical social issues. The second, more challenging and less direct than the first one, is to actively change society through mobilization and action. To do this, art activists make use of different forms of artistic expression such as performances, videos, and socially engaging projects. This description of art activism can be directly applied to the case study of the *A-Portable*, in which Joep Van Lieshout's design was used to impress the public during art exhibitions, and at the same time became a worldwide known symbol of fight for abortion rights. The described work consists of a pioneering example in history since in 2001 there were still a lot of stigmas about abortion and the anti-abortion movements were still influencing society also in the more wealthy countries.

Similar revolutionary examples, who deserved a mention in the text were the feminist performance artist Tanja Ostojić and the architect and author Lori Brown. Tanja Ostojić made a provocative performance at Biennale Art 2001, the same year in which also the *A-Portable* was exhibited, in which she tried to share public awareness about gender inequality in art and society. Differently, Lori Brown in the book "Contested Spaces" published in 2013, researched solutions to help women performing an abortion in the private sphere, to create inviting environments and protection from the outside protests.

As a result, this case study research demonstrates how art has represented a powerful mean in femiist history to find a solution for social issues, such as the death of many women due to unsafe illegal abortion. Art activism has always aimed to make a change, even if not direct, in people's mentality but also the real public and private space. In the public, it contributed to generating more awareness and eliminating old stigmas, while in the private, it served as a shelter to protect the more vulnerable part of the population who is a victim of these societal rules. Using both points of view of the artist and the activist, the pioneering case of the A-Portable consisted of a successful collaboration between Joep Van Lieshout and Rebecca Gomperts, to make a big step in the history of abortion rights. "The Ship is the symbol of freedom, and it has always been," mentioned Rebecca in several interviews.⁶⁵ However, in the collective imaginary, this symbol has always been attributed to males. When women finally take charge of it, it becomes even more powerful and triggers the fantasy and the interest of people.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ YouTube., 2016. Dare the impossible: Interview mit Dr. Rebecca Gomperts <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDm0RQacFUw>.

⁶⁶ *Vessel, Vessel the Film* (Netflix, 2014), <https://vesselthefilm.com/>.

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Appendix

Interview with Joep Van Lieshout, Retrieved on March 14th, 2022

The year 2001, when you designed the shipping container “A-portable” for Women on Waves, coincides with the year in which you were living in the AVL Ville utopian society. (1) Did the organization take inspiration from your previous Mobile Units? What did they expect from you with this commission?

I don't know exactly when I designed the “A-Portable” if it was 2001 or before... No, actually it was in 2001. I know Rebecca Gomperts a little bit, she came to me with these ideas. She had just published the book, she was on a Greenpeace ship and came back with these ideas and I really like them for several reasons. First of all, its ideology. I think that everyone should be able to decide about their own life or death or children: it is a personal choice. It is not the government who should tell me what to do. That's what I think, to decide for yourself. I also liked the idea that it was on some borders. To give an example, at that time I made several kinds of mobile structures because I really didn't want to apply for a building permit. I wanted to be free. So once you make a building and you put wheels under it, it is not considered a building, but it is considered a vehicle, and that means that you don't have to ask for a building permit and there is very little legislation around that. For example, the *Master/slave unit*, the mobile home for Kröller-Müller was a system like a master-unit in which you could put slaves and change the position and the layout of the house, but also the whole position and the location of the piece. Trying to stretch the borders of the possible was a subject of my work and in that sense, the “A-Portable” fitted in the concept very much.

How did the design process work, and what was the commission? Were the choice of the colors, the exterior material, and the design of the interiors result of a collaboration with the client?

Since it was a real abortion clinic, which had to be approved by the governmental Ministry of Health and Culture, it had to be really efficient and not just what you see now in the basement of my exhibition room. It had to be hygienic and safe and there was a whole list of things that needed to be designed: a chair, a machine, storage for equipment and to sterilize it, drawers, and it had to be electricity and water independent. There had to be a waiting room and a changing room and a toilet and a whole program to fulfill. So I followed these requirements and of course, it had to be approved by Rebecca. The logo on the outside was the logo of “Women on Waves”, so I had nothing to do with it. And regarding the colors, I don't remember if it was me, or her, but

probably we chose it together. I wanted it to be in a hospital color, very light green, to give the idea of sanitary hygiene. Also the white outside symbolizes a hospital color.

What happened to the artwork before being stored in the back of your Atelier?

They used it a couple of times and then left it in outside storage. Then they donated it to the Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam, but they said that they didn't have space for it anymore, so they wanted to give it back to us. Now it is there, unfortunately not in very good conditions. It would be better to have it inside and dry. It is old but it is still in good condition and it would be acceptable as an artwork: I think that I should restore it and make sure that it doesn't get worse: I would like to use it again. It is a very problematic piece, since there are people that are in favor of abortion, and people that are completely opposed to it, such as hardcore religious people and who are very persistent. They are almost terrorists so whenever you do something you have to be prepared that you will have people that will try to destroy you, which also happened in this case. I am sure that in my project of the free state in 2001, where this was exhibited, it got a lot of problems and part of these projects came because of the *Abortion Clinic*.

You declare many times that your art is a-political, but at the same time, in the case of the “A-portable” you are collaborating with an activist organization with very strong opinions. How do you position yourself in front of the critiques?

One of the books that I read many times and actually I copied by hand was the “Principe” by Macchiavelli. What they say about Macchiavelli is that he writes about power and he gives advice to rulers on how to maintain or increase power and that you have to punish people. It was not a question of morality or immorality, but it was a moral. He said: “I don't care, I am not here to say something about the morality of things, but I look at it as advice of what you can do, in a scientific way. This a-morality, the absence of morality, is something that I know from the very beginning of my work until now, so I can make works about all kinds of development and political things, wars, and social situations, make works without saying “This is good or bad”. The same counts for the abortion clinic, it is their thing. If fascists were coming to me, I would probably say no. There is a big portion of a-morality that I think is owed to my work.

Do you think that your art could make a change in society?

Yes. I think that art is communication: it is made to transmit ideas. But it is not very direct. For example, if you say: “Let's go to Albert Heijn and take away all the meat products”, that's very direct action. For me, the solution would be more about creating food that doesn't need meat, so that people in a more subconscious way will think about that, and involve new ideas.

Art can involve change, but some art does not at all. Some art is very traditional, some others very political, while mine is critical towards society, towards the human, and how the human behavior. It is more about society than politics, I would say, about the way that people behave and what we do with our world. What I do is that I make contrasts. I exaggerate certain things, bring them to the extreme and create large contradictions so that people are forced to rethink the situation.

This extremity of action is also present in the A-Portable campaigns since it raised a lot of awareness about the topic of the legalization of abortion. Also, the exhibition at the Venice Biennale is an example, since Italy in 2001 must have been a country in which abortion still represented a taboo for many people due to Christianity. Did you notice a lot of critique towards the artwork?

Honestly, I don't think so. People who visit the Art Biennale are less likely to be against abortion. It was also at the end of The Arsenale, so it was not a very visible spot. The reason why we placed there was not a political choice, but simply because we needed to have water, as We especially made a platform for the artwork to float.