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Paint-Stripping

Feminist Possibilities in Painting After Modernism

Katy Deepwell

The assertion that to be a woman and just paint could constitute of itself a feminist statement has been rightly criticised since the 1970s as different theories of what constitutes feminist art practice and feminist cultural politics have developed and as the work of women artists of the past has been recovered. Painting, because it is popularly understood, taught and discussed as a vehicle for personal expression, when linked to a common understanding of women as speaking out or giving voice to perspectives which are in opposition to men's or different, suggests a feminist potential. As feminist critiques of the novel have shown however, there are feminist novels and women's novels. A woman writing cannot automatically be regarded as producing feminist work or offering a feminist perspective on the world.

Contrary to popular belief, painting is not a transparent medium of communication: like language, it is heavily coded and conventionalised. Its methods of production, distribution and consumption and the (re)production of its traditions are not neutral or objective means which affirm only the great and the good of past and present. Its selective canon, its advocacy of particular role models are the result of choices, selections determined by and regularly reinvested in, albeit with shifting configurations of social, political and economic values. In spite of the diversity of claims made for and against painting: for its ability to represent either a window on the world or a spiritual autonomous realm; for its political significance as an embodiment of shared cultural value (its role as propaganda) or for the specificities of a visual/private language, painting has not been divorced from politics. The internal strategies of the practices of painting merge with the politics of exhibition, criticism, and the work of dealers, markets, curators and collectors. Modernism

claims its founding moment in the break from the Academy in a critique of the institution of art. Yet each successive modernist movement became part of the establishment at the moment the latest new break from its very own traditions was declared. Despite the fact that the “death” of painting in the twentieth century has frequently been declared by avantgarde artists, the endless renegotiations of painting as a practice and its mediations by the art market, auction houses and museums continue. What, then, is at stake in this continuous reinvestment?

Unbound: Possibilities in Painting, an exhibition organised at the Hayward Gallery, London, 3 March-30 May 1994, aimed to present possibilities for painting which represented a ‘breaking of bounds’ with modernism: that is, the possibilities for painting after the reductive modernist theorisations of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. For all the dubious claims of its curator, Adrian Searle, himself a painter and now *The Guardian* (London)’s art critic, that the exhibition represented an ‘intuitive and open-ended view’, there were many closures. The selection of only three women amongst fourteen artists to illustrate individualist contributions to what could constitute new possibilities was part of the problem. The arguments advanced by the catalogue did not even begin to analyse the power stakes within the debates about the endgame of modernism or the advent of postmodernism. They did not deal adequately with postmodernism’s declared arrival in the visual arts which reinvested in a “return to painting and sculpture” in the late 1970s and early 1980s only to be rapidly challenged by the strategies of resistance offered by the ‘anti-aesthetic’ (Hal Foster’s term), or the renewed interest in conceptualism in mainstream international exhibitions.

The melancholy which Searle expressed for the loss of the seeming certainties of modernism was all too apparent in his definition of postmodernism as representing ‘too much leakage’. A phrase which implies that most of the features strongly associated with postmodernism - the use of psychoanalytic methods after Freud i.e. those derived from Lacan, to read works; poststructuralist theories of language in terms of intertextuality, discourse, or play and jouissance; and any debates about context, history or politics - represent a corruption of the only relevant space, the only boundary in which it is possible to act: the blank stretched canvas defined by Greenbergian modernism. Searle is prepared to concede one item from the postmodern agenda; its characterisation of the 1970s as pluralist. However, even this concession is carefully marked and delimited: the map of modernism as a successive linear progression of historically timeless moments of greatness (the golden torch theory) is replaced by the recognition that there are now different tendencies simultaneously exploring the modernist heritage. Oppositional or resistant strategies remain excluded in his account, for the communities and practitioners who have good reason to question this narrow, if dominant, version of modernism which was institutionalised as ‘the tradition of modern art’ by the 1940s and 1950s are not mentioned. Interestingly, it is only the abstract painting/

installation pieces of Jessica Stockholder and the parodic gesturing of Fiona Rae's abstract paintings which are given any potentially postmodern status by Searle amongst his selected artists.

The majority of Searle's arguments repeat many old modernist tropes: for example, how, with the introduction of photography, painting abandoned representation and began to explore the means of painting. The totalising, internationalist, heroic march towards purity, abstraction and the autonomy of art is presented as if it were the only project of the avant garde within the twentieth century, thus neatly side-stepping any engagement with realism, the theories of representation, vanguard challenges to the 'institution of art' or critiques of modernist historicism. The argument jumps from the practices initiated in the late 1950s to the late 1970s as if pop art, minimalism, conceptualism or feminist art practice never happened. The re-introduction of representation, of figuration, can then be positioned as but one measure of the move away from modernism (towards postmodernism) but the only marker is the macho / nihilistic work of the Neo-Geo-Expressionists (presumably David Salle and Julian Schnabel, Hodicke and Rainer Fetting rather than the more politically engaged projects of Gerhard Richter or Anselm Kiefer) and Benito Oliva's Italian Transavantgarde (Chia, Clemente and Cucchi). This makes the selection of the figurative/narrative painter, Paula Rego, in spite of her reputation in Britain, all the more bizarre as the only figurative artist in the exhibition.

The central problem in Searle's arguments for the catalogue is the way 'painting' is defined as a unified category. This perpetuates a reductive conception of modernist painting as the formalist manoeuvres of paint upon a canvas (of any medium upon a support) invented by the body of the painter. This limits any discussion of postmodernism to an empty re-introduction of the referent, a neo-conservative playful and ahistorical re-investment with already codified and established 'styles'. Although there is a nodding recognition, via a quote from Thomas McEvilley offered in the catalogue, that a 'postmodernist exhibition' would mix the former boundaries and limits and thus avoid 'both the absolutism of presence (essence) and that of absence (emptiness)...the corrupt zone of intersection, mediation and cross-pollution', but this is reduced only to the scepticism and irony of replaying already established modernist formulas.

The problematic status of painting, after the institutionalisation of modernism in the 1940s, is an important question particularly for women artists. Women painters may have been marginalised by modernism as an institutionalised discourse within the burgeoning culture industry but they have been far from absent from modernist practice e.g. Gabriele Muntz, Eileen Agar, Leonora Carrington, Georgia O'Keefe, Joan Mitchell, Nikki de Saint-Phalle's shot paintings, Bridget Riley, Agnes Martin, Gillian Ayres to name just a few. Feminists have researched, questioned, and critiqued established practices in modernism and highlighted it as a contested field, while working to counteract the exclusions of women from institutions. Such

approaches have included Lucy Lippard's conviction in the 1970s that feminism's greatest contribution to the vitality of contemporary art has been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism,¹ to Mary Kelly's arguments that feminism contests the materiality, sociality and sexuality of modernism,² to the many critiques of the institutional exclusions which modernism has perpetuated to maintain a culture dominated by DWEM's (dead white Euro-American males).

Women artists did not stop painting in the early 1970s and some constituencies amongst the plurality of painting practices have made claims for feminist possibilities in painting, even as the majority of feminist art practice(s) became identified with work in mixed media, film, video, performance and scripto-visual works and now in postmodernist discourse with strategies of resistance. Denunciations of painting as a corrupt bourgeois commodity and an outmoded negatively-loaded media for women were particularly resonant in the 1970s when the art object was 'de-materialised' and the commodification of the art object, its sites and values involved in its production, distribution and consumption repeatedly brought into question. However, work on theories of representation and interest in rewriting myths from a feminist perspective moved discussion about painting away from the notion of 'personal' expression and towards theories of communication, analyses of the signifying field and a critique of the politics of representation.

Postmodern debates have identified feminist practice in photography, performance and mixed media as central to Hal Foster's conception of an anti-aesthetic, a neo- or post-conceptualist wing of postmodernism in the visual arts and it is here that strategies of resistance are positioned. Susan Rubin Suleiman has argued that postmodernism is the first avantgarde movement in which the work of women, specifically feminists, has been central, providing a political guarantee for post-modernist/post-structuralist claims to critique logocentric and Eurocentric thought.³ Suleiman's point echoes Craig Owens' often-quoted arguments of a relationship between the feminist critique of patriarchy and the postmodernist critique of representation and language in the work of New York-based artists, Mary Kelly, Laurie Anderson, Martha Rosler, Sherrie Levine and Barbara Kruger.⁴ Painting practices, specifically the 'Neo-Geo' or any 'return to narrative/ figurative painting and sculpture' is all too quickly positioned as the opposite tendency - neo-conservative and as reinforcing the machinations of the art market as cultural industry/ commodity-based market in the cosy acceptance of an empty unchallenging pseudo avantgarde philosophy useful only as another marketing strategy. As John Roberts has suggested, painting practice is frequently either fetishised as a release from the cognitive and political or dematerialised as being outside the possibilities for any form of cultural intervention.⁵ So where does this leave the question of possibilities for feminist painting post-Modernism or are we still negotiating our way out of modernism? Doesn't this depend on how the legacy of late modernist painting is understood and what position feminists adopt in relation to it?

Griselda Pollock has recently sought to map the relationships of (modernist) painting, feminism and history in their problematic relationship with three orders of space: the social space of art's production; the symbolic space of the art object and its statement; and finally, the space of representation in which social and sexual hierarchies are figured.⁶ Women painters, she argues, must necessarily operate in the strategic field delineated by these three orders: specifically 'the painter's body', the feminine body and the contestation of both through feminist discourse and the practice of the woman's body. Her account foregrounds a politics of representation in her discussion of Lubaina Himid's work and a critique of 'presence' in modernist painting through a consideration of Jackson Pollock and Helen Frankenthaler and the continuation of their project in the work of Gillian Ayres. She is insistent however that feminism is not about women's claims to be the body of the painter nor is it an art-world feminism where women adopt the isolation of studio practice.

Pollock is also rightly critical of the ways in which the question for feminism about aesthetic practices has appeared to be reduced to a simple set of oppositional choices for or against painting as opposed to scripto-visual work. As she suggests: 'Feminism...provides a theory of interventions within a field of signification, rather than an alibi for female expressivity..(or) women's equal right to the 'body of the painter''.⁶ However, if what is at stake in feminist interventions in the field of significations is not to be reduced to choice of medium it is equally the case that transformative work on the codes and conventions does not exclude the possibility of transformation in or using painting as one of a number of possible visual resources.

In the mid eighties, John Roberts identified three feminist approaches to painting and sexual difference: firstly, the anti-painting argument where painting in its late modernist and social realist variants is regarded as a double obstacle to the specificities of the representation of gender; secondly, the anti-functional argument, painting as a radical resource for women, linking up bodily experience with a distinct female aesthetic or 'visual economy' and thirdly, the female centred approach, defending the descriptive powers of the figurative tradition as the basis for a feminist narrative or mythological painting.⁷ Feminist debates about painting still largely fall into these three categories.

The modernist and romantic/idealist (psychic) fantasy of total self-expression, or the freedom of acting out across the surface of the canvas - and the signification of the gesture as a mark of the painter's presence/ psychic expression - upon which many anti-painting arguments have been constructed, remains a powerful fantasy because of its reproduction in the art school where modernism remains a dominant practice as well as an object of study and feminist theory is marginalised. Griselda Pollock has recently criticised this, from a Lacanian perspective, because of the ways in which it serves a regressive fantasy - 'the moment when the proto-subject first imagines itself unified.'⁶ This powerful fantasy of a unified subjectivity which can

freely express itself, she argues, while shared by both men and women, is one which is shattered by the entry into the Symbolic which inevitably organises trajectories in the social- political-symbolic order for men and women.

The overwhelming interest in the work of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray from contemporary women painters, who wish to re-read the phallic symbolic, to renegotiate and even parody the legacy of modernism (like Fiona Rae or Laura Godfrey-Isaacs), make it clear that women are not prepared to accept the psychic-social closure offered by Lacan's formulation of the Symbolic. Nor is it clear that this regressive fantasy (in Modernism) is one which has served women's activities as Modernist painters as the example of the shifting investments of Lee Krasner as painter/women in both practice and person might indicate: known as both Mrs Jackson Pollock and as LK, as 'good pupil of Hans Hoffman' and reclaimed as a feminist painter and survivor in the seventies.⁸

The desire of women painters to explore the Imaginary as a pre-symbolic space is, on occasion, justified as a disruption, a chora, to the phallic symbolic order. Similarly women painters working in abstract modes have put forward readings of their work as explorations of the woman's body, as valuing touch/textuality, bodily wastes, excess fluidity - a reading of feminine difference (*écriture féminine*) potentially constructed against the Symbolic order. Women painting in abstract modes and employing French feminist theory (as diverse in their projects as Avis Newman, Therese Oulton or the artists who participated in the 1992 *(Dis)parities* exhibition at the Mappin Gallery, Sheffield) rarely interrogate or critique the principles which they claim to espouse. Irigaray's own writing of a feminine imaginary positioned outside the role of vision / the look which determines sexuality or Kristeva's theory of the 'abject' or the powers of the chora as 'disruptive' are frequently invoked in criticism as an alibi to old modernist practices, without regard to these women's own writing on feminist politics or painters or the status of optics in psychoanalysis. All too often psychoanalytic theory appears dragged in at the last minute, a theoretical adjunct to 'reading' practice which continues in modernist modes as explorations of the body of 'universal' woman / radical woman painter. Kristeva and Irigaray have been used as a new means to argue a 'feminist' case for value in the feminine, in women's already over determined position as 'Other' and as an attempt to radicalise any mark of feminine difference. The re-investments made in abstraction by women painters which are ambiguously reclaimed as feminine/feminist instances mistakenly associate a recovery of texture/tactility/facture as a textual strategy for writing the feminine body from the position of the woman's body as painter. My criticism of this strategy is that it repeats the formula invested in the existing social/psychic symbolic order without effecting any disruption of the binary oppositions which structure this status quo. As Andreas Huyssen has argued, post-structuralist thought frequently presents itself as a different means to re-engage with modernist works, to think about it differently,

but it has not provided a basis for discussion of postmodernism in the visual arts.⁹ This criticism can easily be applied when considering the claims for the feminist radicalism of such work when it is so thoroughly invested within modernist tradition. The attachment of these theories to certain forms of practice often fails to acknowledge - and perhaps seemingly reproduce - the ambiguities of the political positions of the same theorists towards feminism. The same cannot be said for painter and psychoanalyst Bracha Lictenberg Ettinger, however, whose painting practice contributes to and acts as a means to renegotiate her own theoretical work on a 'matrixial space' which emerges out of an extensive critique which refuses to limit the 'only' symbolic order to Lacan's Phallic Symbolic.

On another level the exclusion of figurative artists from discussions of painting after modernism does not sit well with previous feminist exhibition strategies. Figurative women painters have been included in major feminist exhibitions - *Women's Images of Men* (ICA, London, 1980), *Painting is the Issue* (Rochdale Art Gallery, UK, 1986), *Along the Lines of Resistance* (Arts Council of Great Britain touring exhibition, 1988) - and their work has been read as communicating feminist ideas and as engaging with feminist critiques of representation e.g. Margaret Harrison *Rape* (1978); Monica Sjoo *God Giving Birth*; Sutapa Biswas' *Housewives with Steak-Knives*; or Deanna Petherbridge's *Themata* series (1989); Sherrie Levine's works reproducing Ludwig Kirchner's paintings; Sue William's *It's a New Age* or Ida Applebroog's *Marginalia* painting/installation series. While all of these works use the medium of painting not one of these works is about the rehabilitation of presence or pure unmediated expression of the artist, in fact most operate as critiques of these very notions. The forms codes and theories of signification employed, the contexts in which they were seen, shown and discussed similarly cannot be homogenised back into a unified category maintained and policed by modernist painting nor can they be seen as a desire to reproduce 'painting' as the uncritical expressive product of a humanist unified subject 'giving voice'. Each of the artists named above would lay claim to represent a feminist position, though much could be said about the character and politics of their representations with regard to feminist politics, narratives and myths. It is also clear that these disparate works are not about re-investing in 'painting' as a nihilistic play of empty postmodern referents.

Although there are marked shifts suggested by the work of some practitioners to rearrange the 'visual economy' set by a modernist agenda and which might alter the overview Roberts constructed in the mid-1980s, the critical debate has so far not maintained its necessary engagement with current practice and interrogated the claims put forward. The challenge to late modernist painting and its mythologies from feminism remains: how to produce an effective set of feminist possibilities in painting without re-instating the purity of painting or re-investing again in its overblown status remains the issue.

Notes

1. Lucy Lippard 'Sweeping Exchanges' *Art Journal* (1980) Vol 41 No. 1/2
2. Mary Kelly 'Reviewing Modernist Criticism' *Screen* (1981) Vol 22 No 3 and in B.Wallis *Rethinking Representation: Art After Modernism* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art/Godine,1984)
3. Susan Suleiman 'Feminism and Postmodernism: A question of Politics' in Charles Jencks (ed) *A Postmodern Reader*
4. Craig Owens 'The Discourse of Others' in Hal Foster (ed) *Postmodern Culture* (Pluto,1984)
5. John Roberts 'Fetishism, Conceptualism, Painting' *Art Monthly* (Dec-Jan 1984-5)
6. Griselda Pollock 'Painting, Feminism and History' in A.Phillips & M.Barratt *Destabilising Theory* (Polity,1992)
7. John Roberts *Postmodernism and Cultural Politics* (Verso) ; see also Katy Deepwell 'In Defence of the Indefensible: Feminism, Painting and Postmodernism' *Feminist Art News* (1987) No.2 and Rosa Lee 'Resisting Amnesia: Feminism , Painting and Postmodernism' *Feminist Review* (1987) No.26
8. Ann Wagner 'Lee Krasner as LK' in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard *The Expanding Discourse* (New York: Harper Collins,1992)
9. Andreas Huyssen 'Mapping the Postmodern' in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York, Routledge,1990)

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