

Editorial

What does history teach us about ourselves today and/or the past? How we answer this question is dependent on how we think about the relationship between past and present and if we conceive of the past/present as leading us towards the future. It is often stated that one of the rationales for learning from history is to avoid repeating the mistakes from the past. Even when we learn about social and political campaigns and issues, errors of judgement, catastrophes, battles, symbolic events, struggles in war, work and feminism, the achievements and the failures of individuals and collective movements: we still have to believe or take the risk that this knowledge will inform our present, inspire us, guide us and change us in our choices and behaviour, in our practices and beliefs. Such historical “*lessons*” are always indirect forms of learning: often we learn as much about how the message itself was told, as about the subjects or events described.

If we think through the past in order to conceive the present or the future, then we will always conceive of the past as affecting how we think in the present: is it an inspiration, a rationale, a burden or a trauma? Is the lesson spoken or unspoken, explicit or implicit in what we are told or in how we listen? Is the present a blank page upon which we write the future or are we instead always aware that the present exists in the form that it does because it is saturated in events, actions, memories, identifications, episodes, patterns of behaviour from the past? If we conceive it as the latter, then the present is only visible as a reality to us because of what has happened in the past and in this perception about reality, history always informs the present. Can we conceive of a present, unmediated by past events, by the echoes of other narratives, by the repetition, adaptation or relation to situations that other people have known or experienced? It might sound like a pessimistic scenario to suggest this but if we accept that the present only exists as a consequence of the past, this does not mean that the present/future is completely constrained by the past.

As we know, history (and here, in this volume a wide range of art histories, polemics and oral histories) offers itself

as a very imperfect discipline, subject to endless review and revision. How we tell its stories, Myths, actions and events reflects back on the selective telling of these stories: the choices made and even the details included or omitted. We need history – as reflection on the past – but we also need an awareness of how histories themselves are written, rewritten, constructed and reconstructed. Each time they are told and retold, different selections are made, details are changed, the significance of events, people and places shift and alter in the next re-telling. There is nothing extraordinary about this as a process (nor is it only the obvious telling of story by its political victors because we know the importance of a history from below). None of these features of writing history is avoidable – as we all have different tales to tell about our lives and our relationships with other people, about our involvement in events and situations and the meanings they hold for us, for our family, friends and colleagues, for our society. The question about what is written and remembered: in whose interests was this story told? What lessons do we learn from its telling in their specific emphasis and events? What insights do we gain about other women’s lives? What was omitted? What was silenced or regarded as insignificant or marginal? There remain many stories which we have not listened to yet or have never been heard. Even in practices of history or the telling of tales – which situate themselves at the margins, embrace the voices of the oppressed, express the point of view of Other subjects or feminism’s In/appropriate(d) Others – these questions still have to be asked. Feminism maintains a doubled viewpoint which encourages us to shift perspective, see different lessons, search for different stories about the past, but we still have to ask what lessons do feminist histories teach us, especially about the dominance of certain kinds of history?