

# Mobile Fidelities

Conversations on  
Feminism, History and Visuality

Martina Pachmanová

KT press 2006

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## Introduction

**Martina Pachmanová**

*Times change, people move. There is the question of ego. "Mobility." The development of self. The self, learning to cut itself off from others, looks for its best setting, like a jewel. [...] Paradoxically, she has come to believe more and more in the possibility of change.*

(Martha Rosler)

*Interview is to art history what an intimate journal is to literature.*

(Marcia Tucker)

Spontaneous and random decisions combined with unexpected coincidences sometimes give birth to projects that would never come into existence through pragmatic planning. Such was also the beginning of this book.

In the fall 1999, I received a curatorial research stipend to work in New York City. With a small office, a rented two-story room in a charming loft in Tribeca, and a handful of money, I appeared in the turmoil of this American metropolis, which has dominated the world art scene for nearly half a century now. Since nobody cared much about whether I spent my green banknotes buying clothes or hanging out in night bars, I had an enormous amount of freedom for a few months but I also had to cope with the fact that whatever I did I had only myself to rely on. Living in New York was both fascinating and overwhelming. I was familiar with life in the U.S.A. from a number of my previous visits, but this was the first time when I was fully and also painfully aware of being uprooted. I was falling in love with the city that never sleeps - with all its sweet, sour, smoky, and spicy smells, traffic jams, shining skyscrapers, and ethnic mixtures, but I felt that my new passion stripped me bare. I enjoyed my new situation but I also felt more vulnerable than ever. I wanted to hide

my otherness, even though I knew that speaking with accent and having a slightly strange body language and a different dress code is more a norm than a stigma here. I felt exposed all the time. This mental loss of mimicry made me search for new ways to think about myself and my position in the world. I started to write a journal. My New York journal is a collage of glosses on art and life - a hybrid combination of cultural journalism, travelogue, intimate diary, and poetry, accompanied by hundreds of photographs, in which my professional and my private voice blurred. Being with/ in my journal was neither an escape from the situation nor a self-indulgent gratification of my suddenly fragmented ego. Rather, it was a way, maybe the only way, of simultaneously entering into a dialogue between myself and the people around, a means to become comfortable with being different and with knowing that a full possession of oneself is not only impossible but also undesirable. Last but not least, it was about how to incorporate my dissimilarity into the work I wanted to do.

It is still difficult to say whether it was mainly a surprisingly high degree of permeability between my own private and my public “self” that impelled me to ask questions about how loose is this boundary for other people. Besides innumerable anonymous visits to museums, galleries, and public talks, and various studio visits with artists who I was meeting at exhibition openings or who were affiliated with the same international art and curatorial program as myself, I wanted to talk to people who had influenced my own academic and curatorial work, and who had crucially transformed the character of contemporary history, theory and practice of visual culture.

As an art historian, curator, and writer from Prague, I had been examining gender and feminist issues for a number of years. However, because of the prevailing ignorance and sometimes even intentional discrediting of this problematic by most Czech academics and intellectuals I was forced to search for information, sources, but also critical feedback and discussions relevant to my interests outside of my country. This fact is a sad, but perhaps comprehensible residue of the socialist era and its ideology, which closed down upon debates in any sphere of professional and public life, which maintained a false illusion of women’s emancipation, and which consequently generated both anxious mistrust in any unknown “-ism” (especially when it carried any left-wing connotations of social justice) and condemned it dismissively as imported dogma. The official ideology of the socialist government in former Czechoslovakia conceived feminism as a bourgeois relic and tried to efface all the imprints which the modern, pre-Second-World-War women’s movement had left behind and it seemed gender issues were irrelevant even for people from the other side of the political spectrum because if there was any power mechanism that needed to be fought against and undermined, it was the “genderless” totalitarian regime. Then, however, the patriarchal and sexist bias that controlled the private and public lives of the entire population - be it inside or outside the official structures - remained intact and unquestioned.

My own studies of art history clearly reflected this situation, and this was representative of the general tendencies of both scholarly research and art criticism in the country. Unless one repeated the ideologically correct models of interpretation, any analysis of content outside of the “canon” meant risking political persecution. As a result, our teachers wanted to avoid any ideological standpoint and mostly focused on style and technique. The formalistic approach kept art and art history at a safe distance from not only the influence of communist ideology but also from the quotidian struggles of everyday life. During the totalitarian era, such an attitude might have been liberating but it also created a false notion of art as a politically neutral, purely spiritual concept in which the transcendental creativity of the artistic genius spoke only universal “truths”. That gender issues had no place in this conception of art history thus should come as no surprise.

Although the situation has been slowly changing since the early nineties, I am still primarily obliged to foreign scholars, curators, and artists for both helping me to see the cultural dynamics of gender in its asymmetries and for “nourishing” my intellectual desires over a significant amount of time - be it through personal contacts or through reading their texts and looking at their art. I am cautious about any uncritical or blind application of Western intellectual discourses, including feminism, onto societies that for geographical, political, economic, religious, or cultural reasons exist beyond the imaginary yet clearly drawn demarcation line of the “First World.” And yet, my life and my work would undoubtedly be very different, perhaps obediently anchored in the familiar terrain of settled and steady ideas, identities and habits, without my repeated encounters with the “West,” namely the U.S.A., during the last ten years.

All these reasons are one way or another encoded into the genesis of this project and they also determined the selection of personalities I wanted to interview. The fact that they were only women is not a consequence of a pure chance: it clearly demonstrates the state in which feminism finds itself at the turn of the millenium. The concept of “gender” might have shifted and crucially extended the focus of feminist research in various disciplines, but the adjective “feminist” still designates a domain where men are rather an exotic species. The sphere of visual culture is certainly no exception. For instance, when I visited the annual Feminist Art and Art History Conference at Barnard College in the fall 1999, I was struck that among hundreds of scholars and students attending the event there were only some dozen men. The year after, the gender proportions at the conference were similar and I realized that although most contemporary feminists reject separatism and ostentatiously call for a dialogue with men, changing feminism’s status as an exclusively women’s agenda is terribly difficult.

My choice of whom to interview was impelled by desire for a plurality of opinions rather than by any need to claim any ideological line. And yet, it was inevitably a result of my personal preferences, and - since I decided against using any other

means than a face-to-face conversation - of my counterparts' physical accessibility. There are many other brilliant feminist thinkers working in various fields of art history and visual culture both in the U.S.A. and elsewhere who would naturally belong to this volume. However, subjectivity and situatedness have been such central elements of this project on both thematic and structural level since the very beginning - in so far as they are simultaneously performed in the text through the first person voices, and theorized on a discursive level - that an "objective" anthology of conversations would adapt to what I wanted to dismantle. Although these conversations have gone through many phases since the recording, and I transcribed and edited them back in my home city, I still think about them as a special extension of my American diary. I firmly believe that the non-academic but profoundly self-reflective dimension of this origin does not disqualify but supports these conversations' historical, theoretical, methodological and critical value.

Being aware of how many original ideas, groundbreaking opinions, and crucial pieces of information get lost when their only "storage space" is human memory, I bought a small, twenty-dollar plastic tape-recorder and a pack of micro-cassettes to record my conversations. While some of the conversations still exist in invisible, acoustic form on narrow, brown tapes in my archive, waiting for the right moment to be transcribed, many others have passed through the miraculous transformation from sound to text. The amount of time I spent preparing, conducting, transcribing, and editing the talks sometimes seemed to be endless but it is still fascinating and thrilling to me to see the immaterial, yet incredibly lively voices changing into a written and more permanent structure. In a sense, this metamorphosis could be read as a metaphor of one of the central feminist issues: How can women (and other marginalized groups) speak so that they would be really listened to? In other words, how to make visible (and readable) what has been forgotten, and what was subdued by various systems of power? If oral history was for a long time disqualified as second-rate or unreliable because it did not conform to the "objectivity" of modern scientific reason, I believe that its expressive, emotional, and somehow outlawed narratives contribute to the critical and political mobilization of those who used its various forms most: women.

Of course, the women who talk on the pages of this book are not in any sense marginal. All the eleven of them - Carol Duncan, Jo Anna Isaak, Amelia Jones, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Linda Nochlin, Martha Rosler, Mira Schor, Kaja Silverman, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Marcia Tucker, and Janet Wolff - have significantly contributed to feminist art, art history and cultural criticism in both the U.S.A. and around the world. Whether they work in academia, museums, or make their own art, these women have been shaping all the three areas named in the book's subtitle - *Feminism, History, and Visuality* - for many years now. They represent a great variety of ideas informed by post-structuralism, sociology of culture, psychoanalysis,

phenomenology, queer theory, comparative literature, and post-colonial studies. However, these academics, curators and artists do not speak here the same language that is commonly deployed in graduate classes, academic books or artistic magazines. Entering a dialogue, and directly responding to both my questions and the particular setting of our interview, they avoid disembodied, anonymous and authoritative proclamations. Instead, they use the language that is deeply embedded in their life and professional experiences, and that incorporates the atmosphere of these most concrete places. In its immediacy, this language is situational and performative rather than instrumental, and it thus makes the texts more potentially social and political. It shatters the illusion of mastery and the unity of the subject, and enables otherwise unlikely reflections and rich reciprocal activity with the reader. If these women let their “I” speak in their writings and subvert the notion of the text’s “objective truth”, then their spoken statements - excited, ecstatic, emotional, sarcastic, conciliatory, or doubting - enable them to enact and mobilize their subjectivity on a more fundamental level, not only within themselves but also in their positionality. However, in contrast to the “rough” journalistic character of many live talks, the conversations in this book are structured so that the testimonial authenticity and passionate tone of the spoken word is intertwined with both intellectual profundity and stimulating flow of the text.

The course of no conversation can ever be fully designed ahead, and I was many times struck by receiving unexpected answers that often changed the direction of the talk, and consequently generated new questions and new meanings. Through these dynamics of conversation, the book provides the reader not only with lively statements emerging from one-to-one debates; it also allows him/her to “hear” things that traditional written texts usually render inaudible. When I was recording these conversations, I was in living rooms, kitchens, university offices, gardens, bars and cafés, and the sounds of these places - phone ringing, coffee-maker hissing, glass tinkling, voices of waiters, husbands, children and students - made each meeting unique and unrepeatable. Moreover, their informal course, relaxed atmosphere, and humor of my American colleagues radically differed from my expectation of having official and impersonal debates with distant authorities. For instance, while the pioneer of feminist art history was pushing the button of her soft, leather tip-up chair during our evening meeting so that she was comfortably reclined in front of me in an almost horizontal position, it was only later that it occurred to me that interviewing could be seen as a form of psychoanalysis, although I was not sure that sitting “above” the reclining academic and asking her questions necessarily meant that it was not me who was an analysand. A few weeks after this experience, I talked to a woman whose intellectual statements were accompanied by the blissful murmuring of her newly born daughter. I experienced many other, similarly charming and moving moments, and although their authentic reconstruction is



beyond both the capacity of this book and the literary genre of conversation itself, I still hope they echo in the texts.

The women who speak in this book are well known in various circles in the academic and art world, and all of them have published extensively. However, instead of either simply repeating or maintaining their ideas and arguments that have been already written elsewhere, their statements here add other dimensions to their published work, shift their points of view and allow otherwise unlikely encounters of ideas through their reflections - retrospectively as well as prospectively on the impact of feminism on visual culture and society in general. I thus hope the polemical, lucid, open-minded opinions and tireless intellectual curiosity that resonates throughout this book can significantly contribute to current feminist debates about visual culture, art history, museum and curatorial agenda, and interdisciplinarity.

In one of the conversations, Kaja Silverman speaks about her interest in certain psychic displacements that expand the value of a love object through what she calls 'mobile fidelity'. It is this capacity to address over and over again particular issues from moving perspectives, which defines the content of this book, and which reverberates and multiplies in its title. It is this capacity to get engaged with both feminism and visuality, to be still willing to challenge and expand historical approaches, politics, and methods, to undermine their own biases, and, last but not least, to search for multitude of possible links between them and other discourses, which was a driving force of this project.

*Mobile Fidelities* is about trespassing. I have been spending a lot of my adult life travelling, living, studying, or working abroad, wondering increasingly where I and other people belong, and how one's own identity is constituted in today's globalized world. Being away from home, uprooted from my own culture, and using the language that is not my mother tongue (or as Rosi Braidotti suggests 'there are no mother tongues, just linguistic sites one takes her/his starting point from?'), I was, once again, in a nomadic state while working on *Mobile Fidelities*. It was also this physical and psychic dislocation that maintained my yearning to unsettle geographical and other frontiers, and shatter some of the hegemonic conventions and monolithic identities, which discourse itself regularly produces. Migration is certainly not the easiest and the most comfortable state of mind and body, but it is one which most of the women speaking in this book have their own experiences. Migration can sometimes make us perceive the space, time and the whole world around us anew, and enable us to reach a certain degree of personal transformation. In a sense, this book is an attempt to transgress an often hierarchical relationship between the "I" (or the "we") and the "other" through figures and processes such as 'consensus building' (Tucker), 'dialogism and intersubjectivity' (Suleiman), the 'agency of libidinal desires' (Silverman), a 'chiasmatic' relationship with others' (Jones), 'flickering' strategies of art production' (Rosler), a 'politics of interrogation' (Wolff), or a means of 'modifying the imaginary construction of the author' (Nochlin).

I was born at the time the second wave of feminist movement had just started in the US, and my professional and personal experiences differ strongly from the experiences of the women I interviewed. Besides other factors, it is also my cultural, social, political, and generational difference which I hope can support the book's critical insights and subsequently create new forms of gendered discourse(s). Examining how we are positioned not only within hierarchies of power and authority but also in relationship to other women and marginalized groups, and how to challenge the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion (center/periphery), underlies my project in *Mobile Fidelities*. Although all the women interviewed in the book live and work in the U.S.A., the contrast between their and my age, background, and life, as well as various modes of boundary-blurring, which are discussed and deployed in the book, should withstand the problems of any geographically or culturally defined intellectual ownership as moving beyond a "them" and "us", including any U. S. feminist and scholarly colonization of the "West" and "the rest."

The intention and meaning of many of my questions and comments might undoubtedly seem different when approached from what we rather misleadingly call the division between the "West" and the "East" in Europe. What sounds obvious, or even naive, to the Western audience, could be new, provoking, and mind-opening in the former Soviet Bloc countries, and, of course, the other way around. This split is certainly palpable in *Mobile Fidelities*. Quite paradoxically, this book was published in a rather minor Slavic language, Czech, before it is finally coming out in the original English version now. If we consider that the number of Czech speakers is like a drop in the sea compared to the ever-growing English speaking world, this information might sound irrelevant or marginal. And yet, not only is my "otherness" present in the book but it was also evident in the "otherness" of the Western feminist discourse which was painfully present in the process of translating the book for its first edition in Czech. Only when I began preparing the book did I fully realize how much any language is imbued with ideology, and also how inconspicuously but effectively its linguistic signs influence our thoughts, behavior, and speech. I urgently felt the difference between my "self" in my native tongue and my "self" in a foreign language, "English". I struggled with translating words but also ideas and discourses relevant to feminism, gender, and the entire socio-cultural agenda of the "West," because - on both a practical and theoretical level - such concepts have very different connotations in countries such as the Czech Republic, if they exist there at all. And yet, the book is more about bridging the gaps than deepening them. Although the original goal of *Mobile Fidelities* was to introduce the debates about U. S. feminist art, art history, and visual studies to the readers in my home country, and the course of my questions is, at least partly, contingent on such a task in whatever language it is read, the book also emphasizes that each individual's language has the potential to initiate a communication exchange because it rests on the borderline between oneself and the other.

*Mobile Fidelities* is divided into eleven chapters, each representing one conversation. Their sequence is arranged neither in chronological nor in hierarchical order. Rather, I organized them so that dynamic links between various arguments – whether in agreement or conflicting – could be more apparent without flattening the polyphony of the whole. Although the conversations do not need to be read in the existing order to reveal these links, the book’s arrangement follows an invisible narrative. This narrative, dispersed rather than linear, takes the reader to a journey that unwinds several overlapping themes: Art History and Historiography (Nochlin, Kampen); Subjectivity and Identity (Silverman, Suleiman); Aesthetics and Sexual Politics (Jones, Schor, Isaak); Society and the Public Sphere (Wolff, Rosler); and Art Institutions (Tucker, Duncan).

As a book of conversations, *Mobile Fidelities* is full of questions – from simple ones that call for straightforward answers to those whose length and complexity *a priori* render univocal and unambiguous reactions impossible, and to those that are not explicitly pronounced, but remain somehow hidden in the structure of the text, be it on the interviewer’s or the interviewee’s side. Although these questions change from talk to talk, they are loosely, yet unmistakably tied together by several meta-questions: How are history and visuality gendered? What modes of historical narratives and memories (personal, political, traumatic, embodied, imperfect, unstable) shape the representation, preservation, and transformation of the past? How does sexual and gender politics influence contemporary theories and practices of art, art history, and art criticism? How is the subject constituted, and how can we create and exercise new models of subjectivity for reconceptualizing our past, present, and future? Where do art, feminism, and politics intersect in today’s world? Under what terms can we keep undermining grand narratives and authoritative “truths” without abandoning political and social responsibility? How should we think and practice feminism during the “post-feminist” and post-Cold-War era.

The conversations were recorded and edited during the period of twelve months, between the fall 1999 and the fall 2000, in New York City, Cambridge (MA), and Los Angeles. The conversation with Janet Wolff is the only one that took place outside of the U.S.A. during her visit to Prague.

Although *Mobile Fidelities* does not follow a chronological line, it is enclosed by the conversation I accomplished last. During one weekend afternoon, I talked to Carol Duncan in her spacious apartment that overlooks Central Park and East part of Manhattan. The last recorded sentence of this conversation, which later became the concluding sentence of this book, might sound almost paradoxical. However, faced with the gender bias that still exists in the U. S. society and culture, and with many young American women’s anxiety to be labeled with “the F-word,” and, perhaps most importantly, with the fact that women in many other parts of the world are still being silenced, Duncan’s statement ‘Maybe feminism has just begun’ cut me to the quick. It clearly and explicitly summarizes what is recurrently expressed throughout

this whole book: the fact that feminism is institutionalized in many Western academic and cultural spheres does not mean that it is on its death bed but, rather, that it needs critical self-reflection or even reinvention. Similarly, the notion of feminism starting again from scratch does not dismiss or obliterate the work women did in various fields, including visual culture, during the last three decades; on the contrary, it calls for feminisms that would always be in process - that would keep raising new questions instead of self-indulgently dwelling on their own successes, past battles, and already found answers.

The end as a new beginning - or, *vice versa*, the beginning with an open end - gives me a lot of optimism. It incorporates the paradigm of “mobile fidelity”, which is itself open-ended and highly experimental, and which runs through the labyrinth of ideas in this book like Ariadne’s mythical red thread. From the feminist perspective, many old myths might be gender-biased, but they are also beautiful, playful, and, most importantly, their multifaceted and mutually interrelated stories call for new interpretations. Thus, even Ariadne’s love that helped Theseus to find the exit from Minotaurus’s labyrinth could appear as a symbolic trope in a new light here. Instead of reading it as another male dismissal of a woman, it could be seen as a challenge for both: for Ariadne to search for the ball of thread that would lead her out from the darkness of sorrow and powerlessness to the world of joy, visibility, and knowledge, and that would allow her to play and shine on the sky of blinking stars, which are - spatially as well as temporally - close and far, present and absent, stable and mobile; and for Theseus to realize that fighting the “other” - be it Amazons or other unknown “monsters” - supports his ego but it deprives him of the possibility to move and change, without which he will never see beyond the bastions of the canonized Athens with their ‘intact facade of aestheticized perfection’ (Kampen), or beyond other fictive sites of immune power and images of ideal integrity.

Finally, the conception of a never-ending and ever-moving story gives feminism a chance to become a transformative force: to free us from the burden of a fixed past without being cynically relativist, politically desperate, or utopian, and without succumbing to personal or collective amnesia, or - to paraphrase Kaja Silverman again - to move us ‘from the having-been to the not yet’ so that challenging, subversive, and critical thoughts can ‘come to us from the future’.

Prague, 2002

**Martina Pachmanová** is Assistant Professor at the Academy of Arts, Architecture, and Design in Prague, where she lectures in History and Theory of Art. She also works as an independent curator and art critic. In 1999, she participated in the Getty Summer Institute for Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Rochester, which was followed by a curatorial residency in the International Studio Program in New York City; it was during this residency, that she started to work on this book. Since the beginning of the 1990s, she has curated more than thirty exhibitions, and her reviews and essays regularly appear in Czech and Slovak magazines of art and visual culture, such as *Aspekt*, *Ateliér*, *Detail*, *Estetika*, *Literární noviny*, *Lidové noviny*, *Profil*, *Revue Labyrint*, *Umelec*, *Umení* and *Výtvarný život*. She has also published in *Praesens*, *Art in America*, *Zingmagazine*, *n.paradoxa*, *ArtMargins* ([www.artmargins.com](http://www.artmargins.com)), and others.

Pachmanová writes mainly on modern and contemporary art, concentrating on issues of gender, sexual politics, and feminism. In 1998, she was awarded a Research Support Scheme grant to work on a project “Re-thinking Modernism: Women, Art, and Czech Society, 1895 – 1939.” As a Fulbright Fellow, she continued her research on gender politics of Central European modernism and avant-garde at Harvard University between 2000 and 2001. One of her most important texts on feminism and art history was anthologized in a bilingual publication *Genderová studia v umění a kultuře / Gender Studies in Art and Culture* (Bratislava: SCCAN, 2000) under the title “What Is Art History Afraid Of?”. Pachmanová translated and published this book of conversations in Czech under the title *Vernost v pohybu: Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualite* (Prague: One Woman Press, 2001). She is also the editor of an anthology of texts about feminism and visual culture entitled *Neviditelná žena / Invisible Woman* (Prague: One Woman Press, 2002). Recently, she published her dissertation *Neznámá území českého moderního umění: Pod lupou genderu / Unknown Territories of Czech Modern Art: Through the Looking Glass of Gender* (Prague: Argo, 2004).



## *Art History and Historiography*

### Writing History “Otherly”

**Linda Nochlin**

*White men have dominated the discourses of Western art history for centuries. In 1971, you published an important essay entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” which was a turning point for a radical feminist reconceptualization of the discipline, and for the visibility of women artists. In this essay, you argued against meta-historical premises of “greatness” and so called “natural” assumptions, and suggested instead a view of art in terms of its social coordinates. Thirty years after your essay appeared in a special women’s issue of Artforum, would you answer the question about the historical absence of “old mistresses,” to use the term of Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker differently? How has the situation of women in visual arts changed since then?*

I still stick by my guns. I think women have changed the discourse of art and art history enormously, and - whatever anyone wants to say - it is much better for women artists today than thirty years ago. Part of the reason has to do with the nature of postmodernism and its rejection of a so-called “canon” or “canonicity” of certain modernist ideas. The new premises of postmodernism permit a much less absolute and superior kind of both production and interpretation. Cindy Sherman, Rachel Whiteread, Kiki Smith, Mona Hatoum, or Louise Bourgeois, to name just a few of contemporary women artists, transform the normativity of the celebrated modernist model. The problem these artists deal with involves women, and I would say that they differ from classical modernism but also from the necessarily “feminist” and often very essentialist topics of the 1970s feminist art. At least in the U.S.A., the improvement of the position of women is mainly a result of political and art activism as well as the increased consciousness of women. This has led to the actual change in the power structures, and, consequently, to the change of what constitutes valid

art and art practices. In contemporary art, there is for instance a huge emphasis on the body. The body comprehended from various perspectives is in the forefront, and it is not simply a kind of classical body, or a traditional nude. It is the body through which artists dismantle old schema, and through which the whole agenda of body politics comes up. Provoked by this shift, I decided to teach a course on the body entitled “Typologies of the Nude.”

Since I wrote “Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists,” many things changed, but we should still be focused and work on equality between men and women, and challenge what equality means in various places and various moments. Even though I am convinced that women really have much more power, a woman is certainly not a head of the Museum of Modern Art, or the Metropolitan Museum (MET). Let me give another example. I was shocked to see that the MET organized a big symposium to go with a wonderful Ingres exhibition, and despite a number of important women scholars working on the famous French classicist, none of them were included. This shows an absolute blindness on the part of the organizers, and this is the circumstance where the political and art activism of women’s groups such as the Guerrilla Girls would be needed even nowadays. If I would confront the MET, I would most probably get the answer that the absence of women was a pure accident, but it shouldn’t be a pure accident! This example shows that there are still many opportunities for various little shake-ups.

*Well, a big shake-up needs to be done in the country I am coming from. Unfortunately, not only male but also female scholars in East Eastern Europe continue to be suspicious about any suggestion of feminist art and art history...*

Sure, because they identify with those in power, and that is always more comfortable.

*Doesn’t this lead us to the question of how is the subject of art history constituted, or, on the contrary diminished? You wrote back in 1971: ‘To encourage a dispassionate, impersonal, sociological and institutionally-oriented approach would reveal the entire romantic, elitist, individual-glorifying and monograph-producing substructure upon which the profession of art history is based, and which has only recently been called into question by a group of younger dissidents.’ This notion is clearly related to challenging the semi-religious conception of the male artist’s and male scholar’s role in history, but it doesn’t answer the crucial question of how to enable women to become subjects of art history themselves. Moreover, it stands in a strong contrast to your own writing in which the “I” and personal experience have always played a significant role. As you put it in 1979, ‘I don’t distinguish between the self and the society... In talking about myself, I’m talking about a social issue.’ It seems to me that this discrepancy reflects an ironic coincidence of Barthesian or Foucauldian*



*“death of the author” and increasing women’s awareness of their own historical marginalization. Could you comment on this problem?*

I think that the major irony is that we get the “death of the author” at the moment when women are finally enabling themselves to become the authors. It is a contradiction, and we have to see it as a kind of dialectical process. It means that the concept of the “author” needs to change as much as the position of women vis-à-vis this imaginary construction of the author. However, something new always emerges from such contradictory impulses. As a historian, I do not believe in any “either/or” process; instead, I believe in contradictions subsuming new historical innovations, such as this one. Even though women were beginning to be named in the 1970s, they did not have any level of reputation or standing comparable to male artists. Women and other marginalized groups that enter history do not simply substitute for white male authority; they change the whole paradigm. Instead of occupying the position of heroes, they bring new premises into art.

*Do you think that some of these premises are linked to women bringing more personal and intimate voices into art?*

It’s hard to say that, because who could be more personal than, let’s say, Picasso? I would rather say that it is a certain difference in asserting the power of the “self” which might have changed the paradigm from the perspective of the personal, and which suggested a conception of the artist in a new mode.

*Can I ask you more explicitly about feminist methodology of art history and art criticism? Many feminists argue that to use any explicitly defined methodology is to appropriate the hegemonic voice of “truth-telling”, the absolute signifier of a single perspective which would fabricate another master narrative. Yet, a wide range of interpretative models and methodologies are used by feminist writers and historians, such as psychoanalytic theory, poststructuralism, sociology, social history, Marxism, or comparative literature. It seems to me that there is no text without style or methodology, but the challenge consists in how to use these “tools” to bring both the studied topic and the method itself into a question. As one of the first feminist art historians, you have been occupied with these issues for a long time. In *The Politics of Vision* (1989), you claimed to participate in a “revisionist project” in which feminism is conceived both as theory and as politics. In your most recent book *Representing Women* (1999), you describe yourself as an “ad hoc art historian” whose methodology is “a-user-friendly eclecticism;” here, you again take feminism as an aesthetic and political commitment, and emphasize its plurality and diversity of perspectives, opinions, and methods. Also, most of your books are collections of essays rather than continuous narratives with a beginning and an end. You call this*

*kind of writing a “bricolage” through which the phallicity of master narrative could be dismantled. Why does feminist art history exclude traditional methodology, and how can we write history “Otherly?”*

I believe that traditional, strictly defined methodology is very reductive, because it assumes the universality of a single perspective. Writing history “Otherly”, is, once again, a dialectic process. As I formulate the issue, the methodology, so to speak, grows partly out of it, and that’s the notion of “bricolage”, a kind of back-and-forth between problematizing the issue and the theoretical apparatus of approaching the issue. Such methodology is always on the move, it shifts all the time, and that might be one of the reasons why I prefer articles, which reflect more immediately how I think. I am not a narrative person who would think in terms of the grand finale. Such a way of thinking is very tempting, but I always try to avoid it, and - let me say - it is hard. As a person who also writes poetry, I feel I am a poet rather than a novelist even while writing art history, which makes me formulate my thoughts around small units rather than linking everything together into a big story. As to the feminist approach to art history, I see it always as a critical approach. I am not an essentialist, and thus have no particular interest in depictions of great goddesses or vaginas. On the contrary, feminist art history is a critical way to unpack, break, or question settled notions about art practice, including the essentialist feminist notions that speak about any inherently “feminine” style or imagery. For instance impressionism is often understood as dealing with subjects of leisure, but one has to ask whose leisure it is? You look at Manet’s or Degas’s paintings, and you very often see men’s leisure supported by working-class women: beer servers, maids, sweating ballerinas, or even prostitutes. Or, you look at Géricault and discover almost an absolute absence of women in his paintings. As a feminist art historian, you have to ask not only what is in art, but what is not there as well, and why?

*It is undeniable that the historical experience of women is different than that of men. History was written mostly by men, and this mainstream narrative also emphasizes issues that are important for men. The progress in and of history mirrors this particularity, but, instead of being called as such, it is understood as a universal “wholeness.” When women and other groups on the periphery enter history, how does this change the master narrative and chronology of our past?*

Whether we like it or not, chronology is chronology. But I understand where you are coming from - all the “other” subjects have different highs and lows in history. I think it is a question of understanding the big concepts within art history. Let’s turn to impressionism once again. This movement had some powerful women, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, and these two women were undoubtedly central, not peripheral artists in the movement. In the end of the nineteenth century, art critics

saw Morisot as the “typical” or “essential” impressionist painter, but while some conceived this style as crucial for modernist painting, for others it was a pure equivalence to femininity: too soft, too intuitive, too much about ungraspable feelings, simply, not rational enough. One should question what this discrepancy meant, and also why there were, for example, no women neo-impressionists when neo-impressionism was unmistakably about science and system. Before the 1917 revolution in Russia, there were a number of practicing, fully independent women artists who participated in trans-evaluating the very historical values that the society and culture were based on: Goncharova, Stepanova, Exter, or Popova. The Russian revolutionary avant-garde wanted to have art that would be different from the old traditions of great men and their disciples. Instead, it was to be art without the subject. How does the participation of these women who, mostly, didn’t even sign their works for they believed in new, collective art, transform traditional art history? One also has to challenge the big styles to get to a more complex, and not necessarily linear picture of a historical narrative.

*Unlike many other feminist art historians, you most focus not only on re-reading the big styles, but also on work by male artists rather than by women artists. While examining the representation of women, femininity, race, and class, you question the politics of art history, which - despite its revisionist attitude - social history of art often fails to do. Even though you stress the “pleasures of the visual text,” you are very critical of a mystifying and ahistorical apparatus of formalism. How is the production of meaning or value in the pictorial realm connected to the production of power and subordination in society? In other words, to paraphrase the title of your book, how does vision become political?*

What I am trying to say in that rather ambiguous title is that vision is not merely visual, or, in other words, that visibility is never only natural. The American critic Leo Steinberg once said that the eye is part of the mind, and I would say that the visual is part of the political. The very structure of visibility is controlled by certain power positions. In the nineteenth century, for example, the female nude becomes an object of delectation. It is not just because female nudes delight so well, or that more beautiful brushstrokes could be made upon them, but because certain power and also economic systems come into being which foreground the female nude and place the male nude into the background. However, this was not true in the academic training of the seventeenth century. Nowadays we consider nudes to be mostly female, but it was not so straightforward in those days. When you wanted to submit a piece to the Prix de Rome, you painted according to the rules of the Academy, and it was the male nude that was the testing ground. In every époque, these things are always over-determined. It is the politics of vision that determines not

only how art history “looks” but also what and how it establishes meaning. Visuality and representation are always related to economic, political and social structures. It was mainly consumerism, which emphasized female nudity in art during the nineteenth century.

*Fetishism of the female body is a part of the Western artistic tradition. Woman as a passive object of male desire, artistic mastery, commodification, and mass-medialization has been a target of many feminist scholars since the end of the 1960s. However, what you just said about the superiority of the male body in the seventeenth-century painting problematizes the simple dichotomy between the activity of a male creator and passivity of a female model. Recently, this dichotomy has also started to be questioned by a number of both female and male scholars. It is usually argued that “images” return the look, metaphorically or literally, such as a self-confident Olympia in Manet’s controversial 1863 painting. The notion of a woman as a voyeur, or a seer, makes issues of artistic representation (but also of pornography) much more complex and ambiguous. When I talked to Kaja Silverman, she strongly objected to feminist didacticism and proclaimed that women should admit that they like to be looked at, but the question remains how does this look operate from outside? As the representation of women and femininity is an important topic for you; what do you think about this discussion? Does the visual marginalization of women necessarily lead to the consolidation of women as subjects?*

I find any kind of didacticism very unpleasant, and I agree that in order to reach an equality, it is important for women to be conscious of their own sensuality and sexuality as well. The oversimplified prudery by American women critics - not just art historians but more particularly lawyers such as Catharine MacKinnon - is not only grotesque, but it also sets women back rather than liberating them in any sense. As to art history, it would be similarly flattening and also hard to think of some of Ruben’s nudes as being passive objects of the male gaze for these women are bouncing around quite vigorously. We have to be wary of literalizing some critical notions within visual art, and look for other ways of relating to artistic tradition. Women artists who appropriate images, or are working with their own bodies in the postmodern era have made this point very clearly in their works. However, we should also think about the meaning of visual pleasure. What men experience as pleasure could be very often felt as unpleasurable for women. How much does my identity as a woman intervene into a response to watching? Besides being a woman I’m also a professor, American, Jewish, 68-years old... Does it mean anything for my intervention into the visual field, and if so, then what? Visuality is never as simple as a gender dichotomy between women and men, and this should be important for a feminist reading of art history as well. I have a number of gay men and lesbian women in my class, and they have yet another set of perspectives to bring into the discussion. I

believe that one of the virtues of postmodernism is that one can work with a variety of perspectives, that one is not closed into the box of absolute “objectivity,” (I use quotes here because what is one person’s objectivity is somebody else’s subjectivity, and *vice versa*).

*Nineteenth-century art, and realism occupies a particularly prominent role in your work. Realism has often been dismissed and misinterpreted by most modernist theories for being a mere mirror of the outer world and not formally experimental, and by implication conservative. It is significant that among the most popular nineteenth and twentieth centuries stereotypes about women artists was the prejudice that they are naturally conservative, traditional, unimaginative, mimetic, simply unable to escape the banal reality of the outer world. What is the connection between your interest in realism, which was seen as a regressive form of art for a long time, and your interest in women artists?*

I wrote on Gustave Courbet in my dissertation, and my interest in realism is older than my involvement in feminism and the women’s art movement. Only later I wrote some pieces on women realists. Even though there was perhaps more opportunities for women in portrait painting, there were not so many famous women realists either, and I am not sure if there is any direct rapport between the two. The notion that women could not idealize and that they could only be literal is, of course, a mere prejudice because - like all ideologies - such a premise is designed to hide a contradiction. Going back to Berthe Morisot I want to stress again that she was criticized for the opposite; being too vague, too imprecise, too splashy, too all over the place which was a synonym for being too feminine. It seems that women artists are often criticized for absolutely contradictory reasons. What is most important, however, is to realize that, whatever their work is like, they never had an opportunity to do the kind of high-minded and large-scale works that men did. Some feminist art historians might disagree with me, but I imagine that women would do roughly the same kind of art that men do under circumstances of complete equality.

*I was struck when I read in the introduction to your last book that only when you were away from home could you discover who you really are. It reminds me of my own current experience of being displaced from home for a long time, uprooted in a sense, and feeling my eyes looking differently, and, perhaps, even more clearly. Isn’t it a paradox that if one becomes an outsider one may gain better access to a sense of one’s own identity?*

It is not a paradox at all. I think one only becomes conscious of the self when one is uneasy, when one is not comfortably located. This consciousness comes precisely when you realize that there are other possibilities of being. I went as a Fulbright

scholar to France when I was about twentyeight, and I was flabbergasted by the difference. However, I suddenly became aware of my way as being a way that is part of me and not part of the culture I was temporarily moving in. To be a stranger is being somebody else's "other"; you think of yourself differently but you are also positioned differently. To be a stranger might be difficult or even bitter, but it also is a rich source of thinking anew, a very productive state of mind.

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## *Art History and Historiography*

### Calling History Writing Into Question

**Natalie Boymel Kampen**

*Discussion about the proper terms for various marginalized groups, including women, has pre-occupied American academics for a long time. The very term “women” was criticized for its categorization of an otherwise very diverse group of individuals. An important shift happened in the 1980s when this essentialist and reductive term was substituted by the socially and culturally broader term “gender.” The concept of gender became crucial for historical analysis because it includes the relationship both between male and female historical experiences, and emphasizes history and historical practices. However, the discussion about terminology is not over yet. Recently, many renowned scholars, such as Judith Butler, have pointed out that gender is a flattening category as well since it doesn’t apply to the possibility of sexuality constructing sexual differences. In the editorial introduction to the book *Sexuality in Ancient Art* (1996), you emphasized the importance of blurring the boundaries between gender and sexuality. Could you explain this complex and difficult process, and its impact on art history, or history in general?*

I am not sure that I can. I feel that the minute you try to articulate what kind of process this blurring is, you already attempt to stabilize what you want to make unstable. In my own writing, I make a very definite conflation of the two categories, and what I wanted to do in the collection of articles you mentioned was not to define the terms gender and sexuality, but to keep opening and destabilizing them by the multiplicity of examples. I could say about the distinction between gender and sexuality a similar sort of a statement that I would make about the relation of gender and social class: that they are inextricably interpenetrating, as in unicellular creatures like amoebas that can function only thanks to their permeability to the outer world.

For me, class doesn't exist outside of gender, and gender doesn't exist outside of class, and I feel the same way about sexuality and gender. They are not separable, but mutually permeable historical and social categories.

*Michel Foucault was among the first to analyze the role of sexuality in Western history. Did this French philosopher influence your work? And do you believe that Foucault's History of Sexuality has had an impact on the discipline of art history?*

There are several answers to this question. I work in the intersection of classics/classical philology and art history, and responses to Foucault were very different in each of these disciplines. Art historians have been much more receptive to Foucault who gave them several new terms to experiment with. Since the early 1970s, the notion of power and resistance has been playing an important role in art history. For most of us, however, reading Foucault was not separable from reading Althusser, and my own relationship to Foucault was - despite a lot of admiration - a critical one. Not so much because of his elision of gender issues, but much more because of his failure to think through the potential of dialectical materialism.

Even if what you come up with is a sense that dialectical materialism is so fraught with problems in its binary nature that it has to be thrown out, it is also a spur to take in Foucault's notion of power and make it a much more dynamic and less hegemonic phenomenon. Foucault was really important to me, but at the same time I was also very aware of feminist classical philologists who were very resistant to his theory. Unlike his reception among art historians, there was a real split between gay male scholars and straight women scholars working on Greek and Roman culture. While John Winkler and David Halperin and a bunch of other gay men very much appropriated Foucault (and Foucault in some way appropriated stuff from Winckler), a whole group of feminist scholars like Amy Richlin and Nancy Rabinowitz were criticizing Foucault for the absence of any category of women, feminine, or even lesbian. Finding myself between the two disciplines, and listening to complex discussions on both sides, I learned a lot, and it made me say a definitive goodbye to a single category of "Woman."

*You specialize in Ancient art. Our relationship to archaic civilization is mostly structured by mastery. Greek culture is admired for its aesthetic and social perfection, and, as a "cradle" of the entire Western civilization, this model of mastery has hardly ever been critically questioned. Since the classicist revivals were even more frequent in the modern era than before (Picasso's or even Le Corbusier's work is unthinkable without the impact of Ancient concepts of order and harmony), the common sense about the greatness of Ancient art and civilization was even reinforced in the twentieth century. However, isolating a few striking visual and tectonic elements created an art historical fiction of ideal integrity, a curiously aestheticized version*



*of the social and cultural history of Ancient art. But the situation is much more complicated. Can you discuss how you have tackled these issues in your work?*

The process of demythification is well under way now, and has been perhaps for some time as it was the last generation of scholars who showed the ideological motivation for the post-eighteenth-century mythologized writing about Greek society. However, my own work came out of studies examining the point of view of Rome, and that represents a different case. Rome has never had the historical record of aestheticized success that the Greek world has. The Romans are most commonly seen as responsible for imperialism, the mass slaughter of Christians and other “bad” things. Until the early twentieth century, Romans had been considered great engineers, great administrators, but certainly not particularly creative. With the exception of the architectural monuments, Roman art was usually seen as a “poor copy” of Greek art. And since there was never any pressure to preserve an ideal for scholars of the Roman world, their research is not only explicitly more complicated, but - in some ways - more fun to get at as well.

Unlike the Greeks who had a specific concept of order, Roman art is a kind of chaos of conflicting styles, subject matters, and modes, and that immediately opens the way for a lot of questions and challenging theorizing. Since the Second World War, Roman studies have been much more socially and historically motivated than any of the questions scholars have asked about the Greek world that continued to be kept under the intact facade of aestheticized perfection. I cannot imagine how to write or to teach about Roman culture without thinking about Roman imperialism, or class relations, which also opens the way to interdisciplinarity. Gayatri Spivak’s philosophical essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” provides, for instance, an irreplaceable way of analyzing the social and political diversity of slavery in the Ancient world.

*The Ancient concept of canon has influenced not only how Western art looks but also how it has been written about. Canonicity as an instruction for perfection became a part of the historical narrative as well, enabling the “story-tellers” to have a tool for measuring greatness and excluding the rest. As several historians recently pointed out, canonicity has to be questioned, or - to use the title of Griselda Pollock’s new book *Differencing the Canon* (1999) - differentiated. Can art history even exist without the canonicity that is a premise of a great narrative? Can we write a respectable women’s art history without substituting great masters for “great mistresses?”*

I wouldn’t want to separate the problem of women as historical subjects from the problem of postcoloniality. Despite the enormous theorization about globalization and postcoloniality, many people writing Western art history are still

perfectly comfortable getting it “right,” and making everything outside male creativity in Western Europe, and, in the twentieth century, also in the U.S.A., the periphery. As to writing art history outside of the master narrative, I believe it is really already happening, especially in fields where you don’t have named artists. Simply, the non-canonical writing of history happens first in the hitherto marginalized fields, because there is no mastery to be lost - there has never been any. One of my students, Anne d’Alleva, just finished a dissertation on gender and power relations in the art of eighteenth-century Tahiti, and it is a fascinating topic because it includes neither any great masters, nor any great mistresses. In this context, you have women elites producing works of art as trade goods, a situation which violates a number of common Western categories of art. Or look at the production of masks and costumes in West Africa: the makers are men, the patrons are women, and the users are men and women. This presents a whole set of different questions. I believe it is in the studies of non-Western art where new and critical models of art history are to be found.

*Such attitudes against mastery attempt to shift the boundaries between works of art and artifacts, which traditionally mirror both the hierarchy between Western and non-Western art and the gender division of art labor. However, do they risk reinforcing the fact that while men were made chefs d’oeuvre in the sphere of “high” art, and while “masterpieces” mostly carry the author’s name, art made by most women or “primitives” has generally been anonymous in history, and usually remains in the sphere of crafts?*

It is certainly true that this gendered distinction exists. However, we should not forget that most of, for instance, Roman art is also anonymous, and when you are looking at the Arch of Constantine you are not looking at a work of art, but at a “billboard” promoting a political position. There is only a very small corpus of works of art that Romans themselves considered works of art, and we have to realize that it is only a much later art historical construction that turned so much more into art. This notion immediately says forget about doing the master narrative because it’s not going to work outside of the historical fiction, and it is a provoking appeal to start being more inventive. I am not saying that there is not the same sort of attempt to proliferate the old German model of categorization and classification in the studies of non-Western art, but they also operate with a different model than the one which might follow the Greek-Italian-Renaissance-Baroque-to-Modern trajectory.

*Ideal proportions and beauty are fictional as well. As we know from Greek mythology, when an artist wanted to create a perfect image of the female body, he had to take fragments from many women and compose a desirable wholeness out of them. And yet, the fiction of ideal beauty, “ideale Nacktheit”, accompanied Western*

*art for centuries. Even though the ideal proportions might not be significant for most contemporary artists, their variants dominate our lives in perverse and seductive forms in mass media. The visual representation of the body is not a manifestation of the transhistorical Nude, but much more a way of prescribing cultural, social but also political meaning for us, whether we are women or men.*

I believe that art history has to withdraw from the notion of beauty as something apolitical, ahistorical, and universal. We have to acknowledge not only that the way bodies are represented is a projection of complex social agendas, but also that - outside the Western world - there are different norms of beauty. Just look around a city like New York with all its ethnic mixture: African-American or Latino women often have nothing to do with the white canon. These women seldom suffer from anorexia and bulimia because they rarely believe that perfection resides in the fashion magazine idols. Lush sensual bodies with a level of adiposity are totally unacceptable to the white middle-class that dominate media. What is truly desirable in most white and recently also “yellow” middle class communities in the U. S. is a thin body, but for white working class women or for African-American women thinness is not the ideal at all!

The classical ideal body, both for men and women, is absolutely motivated by conditions of power and class, and it was the case in Greek society itself. To some extent that ideal body reveals a need to mask the disruptive elements in class, gender and racial relations, and, in a city like Athens, it was one of the ways the fiction of democracy was publicly established. Neither the actual nor the represented body is ever just “the body”; it is far from being purely aesthetically situated, because social and political motivation is always present in its formations.

*Homoerotic desire was much more visible in the Ancient world than in the world we live in, and it was the male body rather than the female body that was considered to be ideal in Greek society. Why is it that the visibility of male nudity has been reduced so much today? Why did the opposite sex become the object of representation in the majority of masterpieces in the West, and men, instead, gained the privileged position as the major active creators? Why does the black male nude by Robert Mapplethorpe irritate the public more than Gustave Courbet's Birth of the World which is a close-up of an anonymous woman with her legs open?*

Let's start with the question of where does the homoerotic go? I think that sixth and fifth century Athens was a very exceptional place in which pederasty was ritualized. Interestingly enough, this ritualization of pederasty became an ideal for those two centuries, but much of the rest of the Greek world seems not to have shared this. This homoerotic ideal, however, didn't disappear totally. For instance, we can trace it strongly re-emerging at the moment when neoclassicism was being born.

Eighteenth century scholars like Winckelmann lived in a world richly charged with the homoerotic; it was not an ostentatious representation, but a kind of underground representation of the male nude with which they surrounded themselves. The constant admiration of the Greek male statues led to hundreds of plaster casts being made of them and a wide distribution of these images: so it was mass production that provided for the homoerotic delectation in the eighteenth and the nineteenth century without artists having to become explicit participants in the reproduction of this idealization. Thus, in Winckelmann's age, it is also secularization that renders the ideal of the male body problematic. Nevertheless, the culture in this time was suffused by this "closeted" yearning for an ideal moment of pederasty.

What happened with the male nude in between the two historical moments, the sixth century and the eighteenth century, could be answered in many ways. One way of thinking about it might be through the Christian refusal of aestheticization of both male and female nudes throughout the Middle Ages, and in the rebirth of nudity - but this time particularly female nudity - in the Italian Renaissance. I am convinced that the reason for the Renaissance appropriation of mostly female bodies has a lot to do with the new relationship between artists and patrons in that time, even though this issue is usually interpreted in a kind of [Kenneth] Clarkian way through a universalizing category of beauty. At the moment when the Renaissance choice of the female nude is being made, male artists are making sure that women can't have major membership in the artists' guilds. This is also the moment when male artists want to raise their own status, have their names known, and have a relative intellectual equality with the ruling elite of the society; it is in their interest to use gender as a binding force not only between them in order to exclude women, and not only between them and the elite that provide their patronage, but also between them and the clothed men they paint. Without a very particularized historical analysis there is nothing left but a kind of universalized nude who then becomes a cipher for endless female victimization and passivity in the visual arts. Since women always refuse to remain passive victims, you have to constantly invent new ways to suppress, and it seems to me that the particularity of this Italian Renaissance moment makes that clear.

*I wonder then if the partial disappearance of the male nude could not be connected to the "auratic" and sacred body of the crucified Christ? The crucified male body was an honored icon not only in the medieval times, but during and after the Renaissance as well.*

That is a very interesting way to look at it, and I think it might well be true. Yet, there are also various models of the ideal spiritual body when we move from culture to culture. The sacred suffering, decaying and dying body might incorporate redemption for Christians, but as a Jew I don't believe in this model.

Returning to the second part of your previous question about Mapplethorpe, that certainly goes hand in hand with the secularization of the male nude I talked about before, but also with the increasing anxiety about both homosexuality and ethnic difference that was occurred in modern society. Mapplethorpe's rebellious rejection of the fetishized female body and his representation of homoerotic desire for the "primitive other" of color was seen as socially disruptive, and thus also dangerous. Unlike the artistic representation of female nudity, it was seen as pornography.

*It is undeniable that the historical experiences of women are different from those of men. Mainstream history, as we know it, has been written mostly by men and as a result also emphasized issues, affairs, conflicts, and experiences important for men. The chronology, or progress, in history is connected with patriarchal authority, and even though it wears the mask of completeness, it is partial and imaginary; as Hayden White put it "(t)he authority of the historical narrative is the authority of reality itself." Does the acknowledgement that historical ruptures of marginalized subjects have happened at different historical moments problematize the common linear narration of events (succession of styles, etc.), and does it also bring with it a more complex historical discourse?*

This problem is already addressed in *Annales* school of history writing where the *long durée* ("long duration") kind of history writing which - because of its interest in anthropological description - makes it possible to question male political and cultural events as the "skeleton" for history, and can permit a much wider range of voices to speak. For the annalist or the chronicle writer there is no particular desire to claim the authority to narrate the events, and thus also no need to give the events the formal coherency and imaginary completeness to which the traditional Western historical narrative always aspires. However, the deeper question is if history writing is possible at all? Or, is history always going to be a narrative of empowerments, even if they are multiple empowerments? I am part of the generation that called history writing into question, but it's going to be the generation of my students that might provide more answers to that question.

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## *Subjectivity and Identity*

### The World Wants Your Desire

**Kaja Silverman**

*Psychoanalysis has become very popular among feminist scholars, including yourself. Sigmund Freud's analysis of dreams based on the notion of repressed desires and libidinal forces has opened an interesting path to the examination of other forms of repression, including patriarchy. Jacques Lacan's "split subject", which is a result of symbolic and language productions, radically disturbs any notion of human biological determination. While both of these psychoanalysts can help us today to understand the cultural and social construction of gender and sexuality, they belong to the most phallogocentric theories of the modern period. As Lacan would put it, the phallus is the absolute signifier. Even though you have admitted yourself that 'psychoanalysis is notoriously inhospitable to the notion of "agency"' (The Threshold of the Visible World, Routledge, 1996), you use it to examine such complex issues as the productivity of visuality. How is such a contradictory theory applied to feminist cultural studies?*

Early American feminism was very hostile to psychoanalysis. Concepts like the castration complex and the Oedipus complex were seen as prejudicial to women. Somewhat later feminists, beginning with Juliet Mitchell and continuing with Laura Mulvey, Mary Anne Doane and myself, began to understand that we can only effect a partial understanding of gender without looking at the formation of the psyche. If it were possible to undo sexual difference simply by dismantling external institutions, we would have won the battle by now. The difficulties which confront us as women have their roots in desire and identification, our own, as well as those of men, but this feminist appropriation of psychoanalysis was descriptive rather than prescriptive. We didn't want to use it as a model of how things should be, but rather of how they now are. We believed that what you call a "contradictory theory" could have an invaluable

diagnostic value.

In my book, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Indiana University Press, 1988), I attempt to devise another use for psychoanalysis; to find within it the terms for theorising that within the psyche which might be said to be resistant or even antipathetic to patriarchy. My paradigm for effecting this quite different deployment of psychoanalysis is the negative Oedipus complex. I use it to conceptualise a non-phallic access to the symbolic order, a very different way into the domain of language and the law than that described by Lacan. I define the female version of the negative Oedipus complex as the organisation of both desire and identification in relation to the mother, and I contrast the affirmative form that identification here assumes with the destructive form that it assumes in the positive Oedipus complex. This opening up of the Oedipus complex also makes it possible to account for the many different forms which female subjectivity can take, and even to explain the libidinal bases of feminism.

In my next book, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (Routledge, 1992), I go further with this revisionary project, now using psychoanalysis to theorise alternative forms of masculinity to those described by Freud in his most notorious texts. I focus in this book upon kinds of male subjectivity which are situated beyond the phallic pale; those predicated upon lack, masochism, or some other form of identification with the “*feminine*”. Here, too, the negative Oedipus complex plays a central role. *The Threshold of the Visible World* represents a further step along the same path. In it, I use the writings of Jacques Lacan - along with those of Henri Wallon, Max Scheler, and Paul Schilder - to distinguish between two kinds of identification, one of which works to consolidate the ego, and hence to constitute and reinforce the boundaries separating male subjects from female, white subjects from black, heterosexual subjects from homosexual, and the other of which works to dismantle the ego, and hence to erase those same boundaries.

In recent years, however, I have come to feel constrained by the way psychoanalysis conceptualises the mother and the father. When I began seriously reading phenomenology, I realised that its critique of identification or substantialisation is an implicit critique of those categories. Psychoanalysis has a strong tendency to speak of the mother and the father as if they were stable and knowable objects, recognisable from one child to another. Instead, I now believe that what constitutes the mother or the father for a given subject is a heterogeneous host of memories. Any one of those memories can be the starting point for displacement. The parental figures are thus unstable, shifting over time and different from one subject to another. Far from representing a restrictive set of options that both heterosexualises and enforces gender divisions, the Oedipus complex opens each of us up to an infinite set of libidinal possibilities, and so to the world. Of course, most of us do not experience the Oedipus complex as an enabling and expansive structure, but that is because normative ideology works so hard and so effectively to



close down the options which this complex opens up to us.

*Much has recently been published about the crisis of art, history, civilisation, authorship, etc. In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, you suggested that since 'our entire "world"... depends upon the alignment of phallus and penis...at those historical moments when the prototypical male subject is unable to recognise "himself" within its conjuration of masculine sufficiency our society suffers from a profound sense of "ideological fatigue".' Do we experience a certain crisis of masculinity in today's world, and if so, what consequences does this crisis have for the stability of the patriarchal regime?*

The phrase "ideological fatigue" comes from Siegfried Kracauer. When writing *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, I was fascinated by the idea that ideology can become "tired", and I wanted to look at some instances of this tiredness. I therefore focus in the second chapter of this book precisely on that category of films discussed by Kracauer, the films made in Hollywood in the wake of World War II. I argue there that these films attest to an even larger crisis of belief than Kracauer himself registers: they speak to the "fatigue" not only of American values, but also of traditional masculinity. It is therefore possible to see in them things which are not usually exposed to our view - to apprehend, for instance, that lack is as constitutive of male as it is of female subjectivity. But unfortunately, the films I discuss in the chapter on 'Male Subjectivity' do more than expose male lack; they also work to conceal it once again by inspiring in the viewer a renewed belief in the equivalence of penis and phallus, and real and symbolic father.

I thought for a long time that our own age is more radically and permanently "tired" of traditional masculinity than was American culture of the late 1940s. However, I have become more pessimistic of late. I think that the vast majority of people living in Western culture have had enough of ideological fatigue, and have either renewed their commitment to "manliness" or are searching for a way to do so. No doubt this renewal of belief is occurring once again in response to an ideological solicitation, but it also speaks both to the intractability of the human psyche, and to another kind of tiredness - to a tiredness within feminist theory itself.

I have experienced this last weariness keenly myself. Like many other American feminists, I felt for a number of years as if I simply could not go on endlessly writing about sexual difference. I longed for broader intellectual horizons. It also seemed to me as if many of the battles had been won. My circle of friends consists almost entirely of people who are not only practicing lesbian and gay men, but who also live in conscious defiance of normative sexuality. I was also with a man for seven years who, although he refused to identify himself as a feminist, behaved like one. In addition, I spent much of these same seven years in Europe, a vantage-point from which I was able to develop a certain ironic distance from the didacticism of many current American debates.

However, events in my private life and in the lives of many people around me have

recently made clear to me that the phallus is still a privileged signifier, and that the heterosexual male psyche hasn't changed very much. This is not as surprising as it seemed at first to be. Freud tells us that everything in the unconscious remains in the present tense. The changes that can be made at the social level are consequently far in advance of those that can be made at the level of the psyche. I am not sorry that I devoted the last four years to *World Spectators*, a book whose concerns are more ontological than social, but it is now time to think once again about "difference".

*History as a master narrative, a linear scheme of unfolding presence surrounded by a teleological aura, was crucially rethought during the last two decades. Yet, history goes on, and our longing for a magic story which would provide a coherent context to the past is no less strong than it has ever been. Moreover, the whole paradigm is even more complicated since women, black people, and other "minor" historical subjects have started to enter the scene. We can speak about a multiple or plural history, or use its plural form as "histories", but it doesn't answer the question of how to write about the past apart from a great narrative with its predestined conclusion.*

*The dominant fiction of history and the alliance of individual and collective psyche to the past are constantly examined in your work. Focusing on historical trauma, you have convincingly shown how a mainstream version of history could turn not only against its own production, but also against its own producers (men). You have argued that the conservatism of the psyche is related to the preservation of the wholeness of the world narrated by family and masculine ideologies, but however suspicious you are about a version of history as an 'endless perpetuation of the "same" you still emphasise the importance of an individual's memories, recollections and remembrances. As you put it in The Threshold of the Visible World: 'To remember perfectly would be forever to inhabit the same cultural order. However, to remember imperfectly is to bring images from the past into an ever new and dynamic relation to those through which we experience the present, and in the process ceaselessly to shift the contours and significance not only of the past, but also of the present.' How, then, can one write or tell history with imperfections, discontinuities, and ruptures?*

Yes, memory has a privileged place in my work. It figures centrally in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, and is even more indispensable to my present thought. By "memory," I don't mean everyday recollection, but rather what psychoanalysis calls "displacement". When we transfer libido from one thing to another, we do so on the basis of affinities between the two things. An object-choice consequently constitutes an act of recollection. We can displace in two radically different ways. We can savour that within the new object which replicates the old object, and discard everything which is in excess of that relation; or we can privilege what distinguishes

the new object from the previous object. In the first case, displacement is fundamentally conservative; it points backward in time. In the second case, displacement is transformative; it reconceives the past in the form of the present. In my new book, *World Spectators*, as in *Threshold*, I am interested in the second rather than the first kind of displacement, and in a kind of memory which is more on the side of forgetting than memorialisation. When we recollect in this way, we are worldly; we make room in our psyche for new objects and things. This kind of memory is also aesthetic in the most profound sense of the word. It celebrates earthly forms for their shape, colour, and patterns rather than for their latent meaning. I call this kind of memory the passion of the signifier.

When we are passionate about the signifier, we do not merely savour each new object in its specificity, we also connect it to ever new memories and perceptions; we create an associational field around it. A good example of this occurs in Proust's novel *Swann's Way*. In the third part of that novel, Swann, the central character, meets Odette, a woman who is not his type. However, because he often hears a cherished piece of music when she is present, he nevertheless is able to make her his new love object; the music arouses in him a desire which he is able to direct toward her. Until now Swann's libidinal investments have been short-lived; one working woman has replaced another in a seemingly endless succession. But Odette succeeds where the previous women have failed; she becomes Swann's wife and the mother of his child. This is because, once Swann falls in love with Odette, he begins to expand her associational field on the basis of other similarities and proximities. Before long, he has connected her to a particular Botticelli painting; to a valuable variety of orchids; to an exquisite tea-ceremony; etc. In this case, Swann does not so much displace away from Odette, as displace around from her. I am interested in this kind of displacement not only because of its power to augment and expand the value of a love object, but also for its capacity to figure what might be called a "mobile fidelity". One comes back over and over again to a particular love object, but that love object's field of meaning is constantly shifting.

*But if you apply this passionate relationship to the past to writing history, what we will end up with is a constant rewriting and rethinking of history.*

That's exactly right. The past will be freed from its ostensible fixity, moved from the having-been to the not yet. It will come to us from the future. For me, this ongoing rewriting of the past is the only way that we can be open to the world, and I subscribe to it with as much enthusiasm when the history which is being transformed in this way is broadly collective as I do when it is narrowly personal.

*Writing history anew, so to speak, also requires thinking about the concept of the subject differently. As the title of your first book* The Subject of Semiotics

*(Oxford University Press, 1983) indicates, issues of subjectivity have played a crucial role in your work since its very beginnings. Not only have you been theorising the topic in a new way, but also your own subjectivity is strongly present in your writing. Putting forward the “I” is a way to present oneself to the other, to initiate a dialogue, a communication which is “killed” when the anonymous “we” or “one” is used, as Mieke Bal explained it in her book Double Exposures. You also seem to call for a radical (re)subjectivisation that would open the egocentric self-sameness to otherness and would reconceptualize authorship. How can one remain the “self” and, at the same time, deny his or her self-centeredness or egotism?*

In my opinion, the “subject” and the “self” are two very different things. The self or the ego is what Jean Laplanche brilliantly calls ‘an object masquerading as a subject.’ It is an object because it is one of the things we can love, one of the things in which we can invest our libido. This object is able to masquerade as a subject because it is what provides us with our sense of identity, and for most of us identity equals subjectivity. But identity is foundationally fictive; it is predicated on our (mis)recognition of ourselves first within our mirror reflection, and then within countless other human and representational “*imagoes*”. This fiction is impossible to sustain in any continuous way, but the subject classically clings to it anyway. Through a murderous series of incorporations and projections she attempts to close the distance between it and herself. But we are subjects not at the level of our identity, but rather at that of our desire. Desire is based upon lack - not the lack of any identifiable thing, but rather the lack of what Lacan variously calls “being”, “presence”, the “here and now”. Since we are all equally bereft of this same impossible non-object of desire, singularity would seem to be foreclosed at the level of subjectivity. We would seem to be exactly what Lacan describes us as being: nothing and nowhere. For me, this account of subjectivity has come to seem intolerable in its erasure of particularity.

One of the projects of *World Spectators* is to find a way of accounting for individual variation while still remaining true to Lacan’s fundamental definition of the subject. I have done this (or attempted to do this) by focusing upon the infinitely varied ways in which each of us symbolises what all of us lack. I say “symbolises” because when we allow particular memories to give form to the impossible non-object of desire we transform them into signifiers. In their ever-changing totality, they constitute a kind of language - the language of our desire. The singularity which each of us enjoys by virtue of the displacements we have made is not destructive of other creatures and things in the way that the ego is. Rather, as I attempted to explain through the example of Swann and Odette, our desire irradiates towards other creatures and things. When we allow something in the world to signify what we lack, we light it up, confer upon it a kind of more-than-reality.

*In your work, you speak a lot about love. Rather than conceiving love merely in its traditional romantic dimension, or as a narcissistic relationship to oneself, you emphasise its role for the political and social transformation as well.*

For me, love is about the creation of value not relative or exchange value, but rather absolute value. Absolute value is what we confer upon creatures and things when we allow them to body forth what we lack. This embodiment has important political ramifications, since as a result of our unique libidinal history each of us possesses the capacity to affirm both what others cannot, and what the larger culture renders abject. For the most part, such affirmations remain psychically circumscribed. However, certain subjects succeed in externalising what they see in the form of aesthetic works. A work of art can make it possible for others to see beauty where they themselves could not otherwise see it, and - thereby - to expand their capacity to care.

*The distinction between an externalising subject and an externalised object of both history and desire is closely related to visibility. For the last two decades, the feminist criticism of visibility was strongly influenced by Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.' In this essay, Mulvey challenged the dominance of the male gaze (and creativity) over the female body that is left as a passive looked-at object. Only recently has this binary model started to be questioned. Most of the authors who challenge this subject-object dichotomy, including yourself, argue that represented models/objects/bodies do return their look back. This provides a new way to read visual representations of women and femininity, but it also radically challenges our own position of privilege as being viewers of art because images look at us as well. In your recent lecture about Jean-Luc Godard, you talked about the 'projective nature of the outer world.' Could you explain this?*

In *World Spectators*, as in 'The Author as Receiver', I argue that when we look in the way that I have been describing, it is always in response to an external solicitation. This solicitation comes to us from the world, and it is formal in nature; through their colours, shapes and patterns, creatures and things give themselves to be seen. It is consequently not the seer who initiates visibility, but rather the seen. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the seer could even be said to find her look in what she apprehends.

The train of thought which has led me to this set of conclusions began in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*. In that book, I attempt both to distinguish the look from the gaze, and to establish the interiority of all subjects to the field of vision. This represents a twofold assault on sexual difference, since it is the male look which has been most often confused with the gaze, and the male subject who most often aspires to invisibility. The gaze, I argue with Lacan, is "inapprehensible" and "unlocatable", it is the registration of Otherness within the field of vision. A given look can represent

it within a certain context, but it can never coincide with it, just as the penis can never coincide with the phallus. Since each of us can be a subject only in relation to the Other, we are all equally dependent upon the gaze. Whereas the gaze is structural rather than human, the look is emphatically human. As a particularly privileged manifestation of human desire, it has its inception in lack.

*The Threshold of the Visible World* provides a further elaboration of this argument. In it, I explore the close metaphoric connection for the modern subject of the camera and the gaze, and elaborate upon the ramifications of this equation. I also meditate upon the productive capabilities of the human look - upon what it can make possible. Finally, I attempt to exorcise one of the fictions that has most plagued feminist thinking over the last twenty years: the fiction that the look always effects an unpleasurable subordination of what it sees. I don't know how we managed for so long to think that women don't want to be looked at, or that there is no agency or pleasure in being seen. We all want to be seen. Indeed, we need to be seen - not only by the gaze, but by other human beings. Of course, what we want is not just any look, but rather one which finds beauty in the colour of our hair, the arch of our calf and the way we move our hands when we speak. What we want is the look which allows us to shine. The look confers this radiance when it responds to our solicitation. In *World Spectators*, I finally "phenomenologise" this argument. I use the word "appearance" to designate that ideal meeting of look and world which happens when we respond to the formal appeal of other creatures and forms. Appearance, I maintain, is an ontological event. It lets things "Be", in the strongest sense of that word.

In my essay on Godard's *JLG/JLG*, I elaborate one possible theory of authorship which might follow from this account of appearance. I suggest that if appearance begins not from the side of the seer, but rather from that of what is seen, the author or artist is ideally less a producer than a receiver: she receives what the world gives. But the artist should not just receive; she should also be the relay for other acts of reception. This is the central undertaking of Godard's auto-portrait. In *JLG/JLG*, he attempts there to become the empty screen which both receives what is projected onto it and projects back onto others what has been projected onto it. In this way, one look can make possible a potential infinity of other looks.

*This approach is very interesting, but don't you think that if we accept this infinitive mirroring of each other, or of the world, that we will lose a critical tool for dismantling the power mechanisms that constitute subjectivity in the visual realm and consequently in society itself?*

Again, I want to insist upon the distinction between self and subject. In the kind of transaction dramatised by Godard in *JLG/JLG*, the self is indeed lost, but the subject is found. And agency resides at the site of the subject, not the object. But more is at

issue here than subjective enablement. Every time an artist becomes the white page upon which the world writes itself (again, the metaphor is Godard's), she expands the visible world. She makes it possible for creatures and things to appear which have been until then invisible. And this expansion of the domain of appearance facilitates all kinds of new libidinal relations, not only for her, but for us.

*There was a major one-woman show of Nan Goldin travelling in the U.S.A. and in Europe for the last couple of years that was entitled I'll Be Your Mirror. Photographing her intimate environment, friends and lovers, Goldin proclaims herself to be a mirror of the outer world. She suggests that her artistic subjectivity is reached through reflectivity. According to Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, one becomes a subject in the moment of the first encounter with one's image in the mirror. If we take this theory a bit further, and would think of interpersonal relations or artistic creativity as mirroring, then we can argue that our subjectivity is confirmed only in a dialogical form. That we reach the "self" only through others.*

It's interesting that you mention Nan Goldin in this context. I am very interested in her work, and have always felt that there is something profoundly expansionary about it. I think the crucial thing to note about the title of her one-woman show is that it reads *I'll be Your Mirror*. It is a very different thing to position ourselves before another person as if we were her mirror than to position ourselves before her as if she were our mirror. In the latter case, one annihilates the other as other in order to take her place. In the former case, one becomes the white sheet of paper or blank screen that I have been talking about. This appropriation is not a form of colonisation: rather, it paradoxically frees the other to be herself. The issue of appropriation is at the heart of the book I am now writing - indeed, the title of this book is *Appropriations*. I am conceptualising appropriation within phenomenological and psychoanalytic parameters, and opposing it to all attempts to have or possess. It means to make something one's own at the level of one's desire, and thereby to let it "Be".

*Jacques Lacan emphasised that it is through the fantasies produced by 'artists, artisans, designers of dresses and hats, and the creators of imaginary forms in general' that certain bodies come to seem more worthy of our libidinal affirmation than others. Using psychoanalysis as the tool of examining, mostly, visual arts, you seem to identify yourself with this presumption. In this context, let me quote a short part of your text which echoes Lacan: 'the aesthetic work is a privileged domain for displacing us from the geometrical point, for encouraging us to see in ways not dictated in advance by a dominant fiction.' Does art really have a power to influence or provoke our desires and to transform our reality? If so, why did the avant-garde's attempt to revolutionise both art and life fail? Or*

*did it not fail at all?*

Even though I am deeply committed to the avant-garde – or, to put it more precisely, to experimental art – I cannot provide a simple answer to your last questions. The avant-garde is a very heterogeneous category. What it signifies is also constantly changing – so much so that a work of art can seem avant-garde at an early moment, and conventional at a later moment, or even conventional in its initial manifestation, and subsequently avant-garde. This renders any attempt to speak of it in terms of “success” and “failure” problematic. It’s also not so easy to know what it would mean for a work of art to “succeed”. For me, artistic success need not imply a broadly social or political transformation. Rather, a work of art – whether or not it is avant-garde – succeeds every time it expands one spectator’s capacity to care, or awakens her to the possibility of speaking her own language of desire. Most of the time, we desire what our culture tells us we should desire. As Heidegger would say, we are absorbed in the “they”, displaced in relation to our subjectivity. The art that matters most to me is the art that wrests us away from this “they”, and assists us in looking from the vantage-point of a singular subjectivity, whether our own or someone else’s.

*Artistic practices based on mechanical reproduction or machine-mediacy (as Vilem Flusser would probably put it) occupy a prominent place in contemporary culture and theory, including your own work. Why are you committed to “mechanical” images and what kind of pleasures, challenges and questions do they bring in terms of revealing our singularity?*

I’m not so certain that I would refer either to cinema or photography as “mechanical images”. Certainly both rely upon a technology for their production, but this technology does not narrowly predetermine either what the artist sees when she looks through the camera lens, or what we see when we look at the resulting image. I think that the specificity of cinema and photography inhere much more in the fact that both have until very recently depended for their functioning upon what might be called the “participation” of the world. As I have moved away from post-structuralism and become more and more interested in the meeting of look and world, I have been thinking a lot about the Bazinian and Godardian notion that the photographic image, whether still or moving, represents a kind of shroud of Veronique – that it bears the trace of what it shows. I am also intrigued by the fact that Bazin and Godard account for the receptivity of the photographic image in such different ways. Whereas Bazin suggests that this image is most open to the world when all human agency has been eliminated, Godard argues that it can only be open to the world when its human maker succeeds in being a receiver rather than a producer. Which of these claims is correct? Is photography definitionally objective, definitionally subjective, or simultaneously objective and subjective? These are questions which interest me very much at the moment, and which I hope to address



in a future book about photography. I also do not agree with Benjamin that, because they are mechanically created, cinema and photography are essentially anti-auratic art forms. Nor do I believe that an art form is more democratic or progressive when it dispenses with the aura. In my view, both cinema and photography can be profoundly auratic, and this is cause for celebration rather than lamentation. These representational forms can be auratic in part because the aura is not located in the image itself, but rather in the eye of the beholder. It is what something has when it enjoys that more-than-reality which I am calling “Being.” But cinema and photography assist us in seeing in this way, more than art forms like sculpture or drawing, because they are themselves technologies of radiance and because what they show us has etched its trace there with a pencil of light.

**Kaja Silverman** is Professor of Rhetoric and Film at the University of California in Berkeley. Since the 1970s, she has been one of the most prominent U. S. feminist thinkers in areas such as semiotics, linguistics, and film and visual studies. Silverman is the author of many important books that focus on gender and visibility from the perspective of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and lately also newly revised phenomenology. These books include *Subject of Semiotics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and a monograph *James Coleman* (Hatje/Cantz, 2002) accompanying the artist’s exhibition. Together with Harun Farocki, she wrote a book entitled *Speaking About Godard* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Currently, she is writing a book on photography, and a book - entitled *Appropriations* - which is centrally concerned with racial, sexual and economic difference.

## *Subjectivity and Identity*

### Subjectivity In Flux

**Susan Rubin Suleiman**

*When I was a student of art history, I was taught that academic writing is essentially connected to objectivity. Overwhelmed by this unwritten imperative, I had a hard time to find my “own” voice, and it took me quite a while to realize that to invest the “I” into one’s work could be incredibly enriching. Your work is significant for bringing together criticism, history, and personal memories and experiences. At one point, you said that this process is a way of “putting yourself into your writing.” Why does subjectivity matter for you?*

Maybe I have been corrupted by my engagement with post-1968 French thinkers who made me realize that there is no such a thing as a disembodied and non-localized, eternal “truth.” From then on, I always asked the question “Who is speaking?” The identification of who is speaking enables the listener to have a new way of both understanding and evaluating the meaning of what is said. The danger of this for critics might be a predigested reading and judgement, looking for a demonstration of what one already knows - or what one thinks one already knows, based on the author’s identity. However, I believe that the challenge, for both author and audience, is to remain open and avoid that which is all too familiar and to allow for surprise with every new reading and writing. If a reader can foresee what a writer will say, they are both in trouble.

*How did this influence your scholarly work?*

My first major piece of academic writing was a study strongly influenced by structuralism, a book called *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. It was published in 1983 but took at least six or seven years to write,

so it was begun in the heyday of structuralist approaches to literature. I tried in that book to study in a “scientific” way a genre of fiction which seeks to impose certain preconceived interpretations on the reader. But in the course of writing, despite my “scientific” objectivity, I found myself strongly emotionally engaged with works I was examining. It was the first time when I included my personal opinions, even biases, into my academic writing, because I was simply too much struck by my own responses to leave them aside. Thus I can say that my awareness of subjectivity came out of an interest in a reader’s response. Of course, it could be a viewer’s response as well, in the sphere of visuality. Around the same time, I started to do work on theories of reading, and co-edited a book *The Reader in the Text* (1980) that reinforced my interest in reception. From a distance, it seems to me that I’ve always worked on material that evokes significant subjective feelings on the part of the reader or viewer, whether it was the ideological novel, or the radically different work of the avant-garde. The responses to such works are endlessly varied (“This is unreadable! This is violent! This is offending! This is garbage! This is confusing!”...), but they are all remarkably emotional, and that’s what fascinates me.

*Many writers or artists who deal with the personal are, more or less, egotistically focused on their own subjectivity. When you speak about subjectivity you tend to emphasize the personal in a dialogical (or maybe even dialectical) form in which a process of self-recognition works not only for the author, but also for the “consumer” of the piece. How is autobiographical writing related to autobiographical reading?*

Dialogism is a concept that certainly informed even my earliest work in which, paradoxically, I was dealing with an extremely monological genre. Reading such a self-centered mode of writing, however, can provoke a unique communication, in which the reader talks back to the piece, or, indirectly, to the author of the piece. I consider the interaction with the work of art one of the richest cultural processes because one projects oneself into what one reads or sees. We can go further and say that there is yet another dialogism between the commentator and the reader of the commentary, and such interaction can be endless.

*Then an individual experience necessarily leads to a collective experience, and vice versa.*

Yes - as long as we keep in mind that each member of the “collective” is entitled to his or her own individual response.

*I assume you would agree that many women artists, writers and academics significantly contributed to a “discovery” of a personal and intimate voice in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. However, the subjectification of both practice*

*and theory soon became almost fashionable in the West. The excavated “I” was often taken for granted, because many authors suddenly believed that mere sincerity of feeling and faith in the power of experience could be enough to produce an original work of art or a good critical text. What kind of relationship could we as critics develop towards this proliferation of egotistical and uncritical subjectivity that we can still see around? And also, how can we use the internal voice in a productive and not simply a relativist way?*

The awareness that not all subjective exploration is of interest to other people and that some of it can easily grow into a kind of self-indulgence is extremely important to keep in mind. The only protection against such a narcissistic gratification and complacency is a degree of skepticism about the value of your own work and your opinions, feelings, and judgements. As critics, we especially should have a strong sense of the pertinence of the personal in any form of commentary. To fill critical writing with passages like “A funny thing happened to me on a way to...” is, very often, embarrassingly empty rather than critical or provoking. Yet to make a banality or an intimacy part of a critical structure can, in certain circumstances, be very effective; in other words, “pertinence” is a linguistic concept. The subjective response has to be a necessary part of the argument to be valuable and productive; if the subjective element is purely contingent, and could be taken out without the piece losing its complexity, it is a superficial filler.

*Although it is clear that one cannot think of the writer being a disembodied ego, as soon as we “embody” our writing, we might run the risk of essentialism. One of the most striking things about your work is the presence of the maternal body in it. Titles of a few chapters in Risking Who One Is (1994) are relevant to this topic as well: “Writing and Motherhood”, “On Maternal Splitting”, or “Motherhood and Identity Politics”. Your book Budapest Diary (1993) carries the subtitle “In Search of the Motherbook.” How can one’s writing be “maternalized” without being haunted by biological determinism? How can the mother be represented as subject in a culture that provides only a very limited framework for her creative expression, if any?*

Just to complete your listing, even in *Subversive Intent* (1990) there is a whole theory about a “playful mother.” My idea of the avant-garde is closely linked to the feminine possibilities of play. This is in contrast to the more familiar idea of the avant-garde, as in Marcel Duchamp or Max Ernst, based on the notion of a clever and disobedient son who thumbs his nose at his father, and ignores or even hates his mother as a conventional and repressive authority figure. Ultimately, this is a masculine model, because it comes out of an identification with the paternal side, condemning the mother as an authority without any actual power. As a number of feminist theorists have shown, the Oedipal struggle between father and son, while waged “over” the mother, also excludes the mother. In *Subversive Intent*, I was

trying to imagine a different figure of the mother, and concurrently a different model or discourse for the avant-garde. Instead of a little boy playing near his silent mother, why not imagine the mother herself playing? I devoted a long chapter to a novel by Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*, which has as its comic heroine and narrator an aged mother - a crone, actually. Carrington's novel (written when she was quite young, and had young children) shows the possibility of an irreverent, playful attitude for women, and specifically for mothers. It's very much inspired by Surrealist notions of play (Carrington spent several years in the Surrealist circle in the 1930s and early 1940s), but it is "anti-Surrealist" in the way it celebrates the mother, and an old mother at that. The Surrealists loved to insult mothers (they saw them as the perfect embodiment of bourgeois propriety), and they liked their women childlike and beautiful!

In the essays referred to in *Risking Who One Is*, I was less concerned with theorizing the avant-garde, and more focused on personal issues of my own when my children were growing up. Is it "selfish" to take some time out for my own work instead of devoting myself 100% to my sons? During that time, I did a lot of reading in psychoanalysis that made me realize the validity of questions like this not only for my life, but for my critical thinking as well. The psychoanalytic subject is constructed from the point of view of the child, mainly the male child. As we know, Freud had relatively little to say about girls, but he and the entire psychoanalytic "school" that came after him was obsessed by defining the mother's role. Most often, the role of the mother was to "be there" for her child, with no consideration of her own needs. Karen Horney is an exception to this, though she writes more about women in general than about motherhood; and Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother can also relieve the pressure of aspiring to be the "perfect mother." Generally, even female psychoanalysts have tended to emphasize the child's subjectivity rather than the mother's. Helene Deutsch, of course, was strictly Freudian. But Melanie Klein too had the child's perspective in mind when she spoke about the "good" or "bad" breast and the child's relation to it. One finds almost no conceptualization of the mother as the subject in psychoanalysis; the only psychoanalyst I can think of who has tried to do that is Jessica Benjamin, with her notion of intersubjectivity - mother and child, with the emphasis on their communication. It is important to conceive the mother-child relation as a genuinely intersubjective one, not as a relation of subject (child) to object (mother).

*Your interest in the maternal closely connects you not only with Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, with feminist philosophers such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous...*

Kristeva's essay 'Stabat Mater' is a crucial text for me, especially because it comes out of her own experience of being a mother, which radically differentiates it from

Freud or Lacan. Moreover, Kristeva discusses another, much older Western tradition, Christianity, which is focused on the cult of the mother. She shows how the figure of the Virgin Mary is defined in relation to her son, and how Christian iconography emphasizes the notion of the perfect mother as somebody who prostrates herself before her son. Again, it was masculinity in front of which the ideal woman was to kneel. Kristeva has been accused of idealizing the maternal, and that's what you were getting at in your previous question. We have to understand that in this essay she was reacting against the particular strain of feminist thought in France that originated in Simone de Beauvoir's enormously influential *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir, intellectual women's emancipation and motherhood were totally opposed to each other - in this, she was quite similar to the Surrealists. In contrast, Kristeva brought these two concepts together, and used the figure of the mother to stand for the "dissident," whether male or female, which I consider to be a strong argument against those who criticize her for reinforcing biological determinism. This liberatory view of the mother was shared by Cixous who, in her beautifully lyrical way, was saying that to have a child doesn't make a woman less revolutionary. Cixous also emphasized the erotic and sensual aspect of the mother's relationship to the child in giving birth or breast-feeding. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was seen as essentializing the female body. I believe, nevertheless, that this "maternal discourse" is a very rich and provoking phenomenon, because it provided another allegory of femininity that opened new ways for feminist thought. It challenged the concept of feminist "unanimity" as well as the concept of the total social constructedness of gender, both of which could lead to a view of motherhood as incompatible with intellectual and political activity for women. My concept of the "playful mother" as an enabling myth for the theory of the avant-garde is similarly linked to understanding motherhood as a potentially subversive cultural and social force. It is a "maternal" discourse that associates the mother not only with taking care of children, but also with sexual desire, intellectual power and political engagement. I find this configuration neither contradictory nor blindly utopian. Cixous's concept of the sexual dimension of writing that she has described in terms of "making love to the text" is not only poetic, but also very liberating.

*In this context, it is also significant to see a large number of contemporary women artists working with body and sexuality, who break many feminist taboos of "politically correct" representation of femininity. Rather than adopting symbolism of the 1970s central core aesthetics, these women artists (some of them would most probably call themselves bad girls) use explicit sexual imagery to reveal women's sexual desire that could be very liberating. And yet, they are often criticized for re-establishing the role of women as passive objects of male desire. In Risking Who One Is, you brought up the question of where does the sexual and gender difference reside, and even though you spoke about ideological interests and social determination, you claimed that "the body keeps intruding."*

A lot of sexually explicit imagery used by contemporary women artists is certainly different than what was done thirty years ago. However, there is a similarity in some of the hostile reactions, even by feminists, to these “disobedient” girls who paint penises and vaginas, or write about orgasmic pleasure: they are accused of pornography, while the earlier artists were accused of essentialism (or, in some cases, also of pornography). It makes me think about the narrow-mindedness of these reactions, which deny female sexuality and pleasure, thus making women one-dimensional beings once again. If the asexual mother producing babies is the ideal of religious conservatives, the counterfigure for feminists should not be the asexual, non-maternal intellectual and activist. In general, we should be suspicious of “ideal models.” Including, of course, our own! I wrote the sentence about the “intruding body” more than ten years ago but I still stick with it.

*The other day, I was reading an interesting book, Focus on the Maternal: Female Subjectivity and Images of Motherhood (1998), by Ulrike Sieglöhr. While discussing photography and the status of the mother as creator, Sieglöhr argues that a gradual but significant shift in feminist artistic and writing practice occurs today: that from the daughter’s to the mother’s point of view. Would you agree with it?*

Strictly speaking, it’s probably exaggerated to speak about the mother’s discourse taking over the traditional daughter’s discourse. Just look around you, it is still not so common to see women scholars or artists being mothers. There are still the same social, psychological, and financial pressures that women have to deal with when they try to do at least two important things at the same time: raise a child and produce significant intellectual work. Do we have good quality day care? Do we have fathers who take an equal position in raising children? Do we have friendly work hours? Women have a bit more than they had some twenty years ago, but these questions continue to play a crucial role in most professional women’s lives.

*On the other hand, while it was almost forbidden for a 1970s feminist to speak about motherhood, contemporary feminism seems to be much more informed by it. Sieglöhr, for instance, analyses in her book contemporary photography that either works with and challenges traditional maternal images or is done by artists-mothers. She does not seem to care about statistics (although numbers are important sources of information about the society) as much as about the discursive dimension of motherhood. Even though some might condemn it as a mere theory, I believe that no change in society is possible without a discursive premise.*

That’s a very important issue to be discussed among both feminist and non-feminist scholars. As we know, maternal images are usually interpreted either as unquestionable models of ideal motherhood, or as expressions of uncritical

sentimentality, if not kitschiness. To look for other ways to produce and analyze such images (can they be at once positive and unconventional, even revolutionary?) could help to reconsider what motherhood represents in our society.

*Challenging gender bias in avant-garde literature and art is the key for your academic work, and it is the Surrealist movement you seem to be particularly devoted to. In this context, I cannot help asking you about your reaction to Rosalind Krauss's Bachelors (1999). Discussing the work of Dora Maar and Claude Cahun in her introduction, Krauss argues against the common feminist notion about the subjugation of women Surrealists to their male counterparts' imagination. It is your essay on women Surrealists published in Subversive Intent that has become a target of Krauss's radical disagreement. Could you comment on it?*

Rosalind Krauss and I criticize each other in print, but we are friends and we respect each other. In 'Double Margin', the first essay of *Subversive Intent*, I pointed out a narrow understanding of subjectivity in Krauss's work on Surrealism and photography, and called for a revision of this concept. What I found mostly problematic is that when Krauss says 'women are the subject of Surrealist photography', she in fact means that they are the "objects" in front of the camera. She never takes into account the concept of subjectivity to ask how women become creative artists themselves. To write about Claude Cahun, a woman photographer and a lesbian who was constantly "pushing" the boundaries of sexual identity in her work, without ever discussing the issue of her gender is, I think, a mistake. Krauss never asked a crucial question we started this interview with: Is the subject of artistic creation embodied? Another notion of subject that never came up for Krauss is the Foucauldian definition of subject as one who is "subjected", whether to the gaze of the photographer or to his physical power. In Surrealist photography, women were also subjected in this way. Hans Bellmer's pictures of his lover Unika Zürn tied up like a piece of meat are a great example. I am not one of those who would condemn Surrealism en bloc because some of its male artists subjugated women in this way, but we still have to be aware of this dimension of Surrealism and question the meaning of these acts. The absence of such considerations in Krauss's work continues to disturb me.

*You have an extensive experience with diaries, journals, and oral history, including interviews. How could these peripheral forms of historical narrative change writing history, or, simply, our attitude towards the past?*

Oral testimonies - by women, war victims, survivors of torture or prison - are extremely important for a process or rethinking what we know about the past or the concept of History. The more "raw", "uncultivated", or simply marginalized forms of



histories we will have, the richer the concept of our past will be, but also the more challenging our attempt to make sense of it. I think that although testimonial documents that are considered more “authentic” because they are, or seem to be, “unmediated” or “unrehearsed”, they should be treated like any other historical document, that is, with skepticism as well as respect. What I said before about critical responsibility of inserting the personal into writing can be applied to this issue as well. It should always remain our responsibility to ask at what level the testimony could work. Are we going to use testimonies to establish “facts?” If so, then we need to have some criteria of verifiability. But we can use testimonies not for the facts they may provide, but also for the affect of emotion they communicate. When we consider the geographical, cultural, political and psychological specificity of a person who shares with us his/her information, then the testimony can become part of the history. Personal testimony, whether factual or emotional, should not be divorced from the larger context that gives it historical meaning.

*You spoke now about history, mentioned war, and even used such a strong term as “responsibility.” I wonder how we can use such morally imperative words after the lesson of post-structuralism and deconstructivism that tell - and even convinced - some of us that the universal truth is not possible any more. Should we follow postmodernist relativism that was introduced by Jean Baudrillard in his seductive and appealing theory of the simulacrum? I used to be provoked by Baudrillard for a long time but I think now that he, quite cynically, shuts down any possibility of being responsible in and to this world. It seems important and also encouraging to me that within the last couple of years - after conflicts in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere - the question of both individual and collective political and social responsibility was again raised by a number of intellectuals.*

*The interest in ethics in culture and academia is not only reflected in your previous answer but it seems you have been concerned with these issues for a long time. You even proposed a term “ethical postmodernism.” How can we as scholars, writers, and critics to get engaged with political responsibility without being either didactically propagandistic, or eclectically trivial?*

Whatever we do, we should never forget this question. In the essay you refer to, ‘The Politics of Postmodernism After the Wall, or What Do We Do When the Ethnic Cleansing Starts?’, I argue for the importance of understanding that there is no God-given truth. It does not necessarily mean that you wash your hands and say: ‘It’s how it is, and therefore I’ll do nothing.’ There is always the possibility for the theoretical understanding that your position is determined by your particular context and your actions are the result of that understanding. Being aware of a multiplicity of points of view doesn’t entail dismissing values one believes in. Of course, values change as the circumstances of our lives change, but awareness of the relativity of one’s own

values, which Richard Rorty calls irony, is not necessarily in contradiction with one's need to act on those values at any given time. I criticized Rorty in my essay, because he claims in his book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that the ironist's position is good for private life, but has no role in the public life. Since Rorty tends to identify the ironist as "she," it occurred to me that this split amounted to saying, 'Women's place is in the home!' Seeing the flood of smug rhetoric that overwhelms our public life, I wonder whether it wouldn't be helpful to have a certain degree of self-irony in public discourse. But personally, I think that an occasional turn to irony - in the Rortyan sense, which is not at all the same thing as Baudrillardian cynicism - wouldn't paralyze our public discourse of existence. On the contrary!

*The notion of the political responsibility of intellectuals is also closely related to the concept of the avant-garde. In the end of the 1980s, you and Alice Jardine ran a Summer Institute for College and University Teachers that was focused on 'The Future of the Avant-garde in Postmodern Culture'. Unlike a lot of other feminist scholars, you have never despised the ideas of the historical avant-gardes. What can we learn from the avant-garde agenda at the beginning of the twenty-first century or should we learn from it at all?*

In *Subversive Intent*, I spoke about the "avant-garde dream", which was to combine artistic experimentation with political or social innovation. The Surrealists, for instance, wanted both social revolution and revolutionizing of art. They failed, largely because the people who wanted social revolution (at that time, the Communists) hated their art, and the people who loved their art were very suspicious of social revolution. My argument in that book was that the desire to be innovative on these two fronts exists even in postmodern culture, mostly, among marginalized groups: women, homosexuals, the formerly colonized. If we consider, for instance, the strength of the feminist movement and the fascinating body of work that women artists produced in the 1980s, the dream of the collation of politics and artistic creativity was certainly alive. This position of mine some ten years ago was not solitary; it was also that of other theorists, such as Hal Foster, Linda Hutcheon, or Andreas Huyssen. However, the situation has evolved and my position has changed as well. I see more clearly now how easily various kinds of mechanisms of social and cultural control (art market, advertisement, censorship) swallow discourse and exploit it, sensationalize it, and, ultimately, capitalize on it. In such a context, the "avant-garde dream" is an empty concept, and programmatic statements about combining radical social practice with genuine artistic innovation are a bit foolish. And yet, I don't want to proclaim that 'everything is corrupt' - that would be both cynical and hysterical; nor do I want to claim that we should adopt a passive, conciliatory attitude toward how things are. The world is changing so fast - think, for example, of what the astounding growth

of the Web in the past two or three years has done to our sense of time, space, and communication. Undoubtedly, this offers undreamed-of possibilities to artists, including new ways to pursue the “avant-garde dream.” As we know, social or political engagement in art can take many forms, from explicit statements in the works of Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer to visual metaphors, as in Kiki Smith or Cindy Sherman, just to remain in the feminist domain that we are already familiar with. But there are many other ones to be discovered!

*You were born into a Jewish family in Budapest just a few years before the Second World War, and your experience from that time is the experience of a child who had to hide her identity and change her name in order to survive. Some ten years ago, in an essay devoted to H  l  ne Cixous (who was born in 1937), you asked: “Is it possible for a European born before 1939 to think of history... as anything but a form of luck?” I am fascinated by your comparison between history and luck, and even thought I think I understand its meaning in the context, in which you wrote it, I wonder what implications the notion of “luck” could have on reading history? And, last but not least, what impact does your personal war experience have on your work?*

The big illumination for me came when I realized that my life experience was radically different from somebody who was born only five years later, because my first memories are from the last two years of the war - in other words, I actually remember what to someone born in 1944 is only hearsay or imagination. What effect this had on my future professional life is hard to say. I was trying to figure that out during last few years, and that’s why I went back to Hungary and wrote my book *Budapest Diary* (1993). “Luck” is a philosophical concept for me. It is something that we cannot influence or control. Perhaps the most horrible torment (at least, mentally) about Holocaust victims is that they had no means to determine their fate. And if they survived, their survival could not be ascribed to their own capabilities. I am not talking here about Jews who made a wise choice to leave Hungary or Germany in the 1930s. I am talking about people who were under Nazi control during the war, like my family in Budapest in 1944-45. We did not get deported, we did not get shot into the Danube, we did not starve to death - not because we were exceptionally smart, but because we were just damn lucky. “Luck” is a philosophical question because it asks to what extent our decisions determine our lives. My parent’s decision to hide in Budapest under false identities helped us survive, but it wouldn’t have necessarily worked for other families - and it could have not worked for us. I don’t want to completely relativize our past, but I believe that, as far as history is concerned, the concept of luck is an important means for challenging the idea of fixed truths, “right” choices and “wrong” choices. The consequences of our decisions are usually unpredictable, and that’s what makes our lives so rich but also so difficult.

*The most appropriate thing to say to conclude this conversation should be, then, "Good luck!" But before doing that, let me ask you the last question, which would, in a way, relate your personal history with the question of difference we already touched upon. Your Budapest Diary provides plenty of interesting observations about both gender and the racial agenda in Hungarian society. Do you see any relation between sexism and xenophobic, or racist tendencies in contemporary Eastern Europe?*

Both sexism and racism involve the construction of an "other" by a dominant group. Women are the "second sex," the "weaker sex," they are different from "us" men; foreigners, Jews, Gypsies, people with "dark" skin are different from "us" white people. In both these formulas, "different" also means, of course, "less good." For decades under Communist rule in Eastern Europe, difference was not discussed, one could even say was not tolerated, as a concept: all citizens were theoretically "equal", even though everyone knew that some were more (or less) "equal" than others. After the fall of the Wall, ethnic and national differences suddenly came to the fore, but in an extremely troubling way. Since nothing had been discussed, people returned to traditional concepts of national identity and started the business of reconstructing their traditional "others". The results, as we know, have been horrendous - not only in former Yugoslavia, but also in former East Germany, in Slovakia, in Hungary, or even in your country, where ugly strains of racism have surfaced with more or less virulence. How to accept and even celebrate differences without immediately constituting them into a hierarchy, that's the question. And while we, in the West, may have gone further in theorizing that question and trying to live accordingly, we too have a long way to go.

**Susan Rubin Suleiman** Kaja Silverman is Class of 1940 Professor of Rhetoric and Film at the University of California at Berkeley. Since the 1970s, she has been one of the most prominent U. S. feminist thinkers in areas such as semiotics, linguistics, and film and visual studies. Silverman is the author of many important books that focus on gender and visuality from the perspective of psychoanalysis, poststructuralism, and phenomenology. These books include *Subject of Semiotics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), *World Spectators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), and a monograph on James Coleman (Hatje/Cantz, 2002) accompanying the artist's exhibition. Together with Harun Farocki, she wrote a book entitled *Speaking About Godard* (New York: New York University

Press, 1999). Silverman has also written recent articles about Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Jeff Wall, and Allan Sekula. She is in the process of completing a book called *Flesh of My Flesh*, which offers a political, philosophical and aesthetic response to our current historical moment, and imagines a radically different relationality

Her first book was *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), followed by an edited anthology of texts, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Her other books include *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), and the autobiographical *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). She edited the volume *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travellers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), and - together with Eva Forgács - the anthology *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Hungary* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2003).

## *Aesthetics and Sexual Politics*

### Art's Sexual Politics

**Amelia Jones**

*Let's start with a banal question, how and why did you become a feminist scholar?*

You could say feminism was always nascent within me. I grew up in a family with three sisters, two brothers and a relatively sexist father, and my sisters and I became very competitive in order to prove to our father that women could accomplish as much as men. When I started to study art history, and contemporary art in particular, I naturally gravitated towards feminist issues. As an undergraduate I studied at Harvard, and after working for a while in New York, I went to the University of Pennsylvania to start my masters degree. Later on, I transferred to UCLA. Interestingly enough, there was no particular woman scholar who influenced me during my studies, because, simply, there was nobody remarkable around. I became a feminist scholar, more or less, on my own. While living in New York again in 1990, I began to meet people who had been involved in feminist art for a long time, such as Mira Schor and Carolee Schneemann. When I was a graduate student I also started to teach and to do some free-lance work as a curatorial assistant in museums, and that's how my curatorial activities began. My teaching and curating developed in tandem at the same time.

*In 1996, you curated and organized the show Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History, which took place in the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. The show became highly controversial before it opened. One of the accusations was that organizing such a show heroized Chicago's legacy, either its feminist essentialism, or a view of it as pornography, and due to this tension five prominent women artists (Mary Beth Edelson, Joyce Kozloff, Miriam Schapiro, Nancy Spero, Joan Snyder) refused to have their work included in the show.*

*The organic “central core”, or some would say “cunt” imagery, promoted by Chicago, was highly criticized especially in the 1980s. While you never took a clear position of either an essentialist or poststructuralist feminist, it seems that you deliberately positioned the Dinner Party as a central focus of the post-war feminist art history. Why?*

Chicago's *Dinner Party* has, for better or worse, generated a great amount of important debate and discourse. Whether one likes the piece or not, it seems undeniable that it is a significant work of art that has to be historically and politically contextualized. I admit now, three years after the show, that what I was not prepared for was the predetermined nature of people's responses to Chicago's position in the show, which prevented many from being able to think clearly about the legacy of the *Dinner Party*, or to rethink post-war feminist art history in a new way. It was very disappointing to me.

*When we approach the Dinner Party from a purely formal perspective, the essentialist imagery will always remain the most significant part of this work. However, when we analyze its content and think about all those women of history to whom Chicago has devoted her piece, a more complex meaning of the whole piece could emerge. I am not a big fan of Chicago's work, but I still believe that to read it through the prism of formalism and omit its social and political message would be a very reductive interpretation.*

That's an interesting and important point. I also think that the so-called essentialism of central core iconography is much more complex than many of its critics want it to be, and it needs to be reexamined. It needs to be reexamined especially in light of some of the prescriptive character of later 1980s feminist theory. We have to see that both the notion of social constructed-ness and that of the necessary deconstruction of the dominant male gaze, introduced in the 1980s, were, in many ways, as limiting as the kind of essentialism that celebrates a universal female identity symbolized by forms evocative of women's bodily experiences.

*Could you explain a bit more about the complexity of “vaginal” imagery so that one can understand it as more than a relic of biological determinism?*

If you go back and carefully read all the materials that were written about this topic around the time when this imagery appeared in women artists' work, you will realize that the “advocates” of this iconography weren't simply saying that women's experience could be reduced to biology, nor that women's artistic expression should be determined by the shapes of their bodies. Even in the text written by Chicago and Miriam Shapiro, ‘Female Imagery’ (1973), which comes the closest to relating “female”

forms to women's art making has aspects in it that tie biology to politics. I believe that, while clearly trying to formulate what kind of art could make an impact on cultural and social stereotypes, and thus to define a coherent notion of feminist art, it was, in fact, a much more ambiguous and ambivalent theory. And, of course, practice as well.

*There is a strong tendency in the U.S.A. to compare or contrast West and East Coast art. It was in California where the first feminist art program started in 1972, and it is not unusual to see a link drawn between essentialism and West Coast feminism. Could you comment on these standpoints?*

This aspect of feminist debates has been around for a long time, and it is true that the "worst" kind of essentialism is associated with the West Coast. However, since so many women have moved back and forth, to draw any borderline between the West and East Coast based on any ideological preference is very superficial and misleading. And there are other problematic dichotomies in the feminist debates - just look at the eternal British-versus-American "conflict"! And, again, let's not forget that however many "vulgar" images were made by members of the Feminist Art Program in Fresno, it was a place where a highly politicized feminist agenda was formulated and practiced. I believe that the oversimplification of feminist differences on the basis of geography was caused at least in part by the fact that Chicago offered such a perfect "bad" feminist paradigm, and that was also one of the reasons why I wanted to do the show *Sexual Politics*. My main concern wasn't the unfairness to Chicago; I didn't have any need or agenda to revitalize her career. Rather, I was motivated to try to correct an art historical misinterpretation and a misrepresentation of the feminist art movement, or post-war American art in general.

*Even though you are saying that your intention wasn't to revitalize Chicago's career, the show *Sexual Politics* and its catalogue put a huge emphasis on this artist's work. Doesn't this concept contrast with a feminist deconstruction of myths about male artists in history?*

It is more complicated, and you have to know the history of the show. I didn't deliberately decide to curate the exhibition of the *Dinner Party*, but I was asked to do so. Perhaps it was my mistake to think that I could use that piece as a way to examine the history of feminist art without being perceived as a heroic champion of Chicago. As a historian I was not concerned with the artist *per se* but rather, with one particular piece of art and its position in a labyrinth of meanings, influences, effects and relations. I wasn't interested in curating that piece of art because it is a pre-curated piece, and I didn't even understand why any institution would ask a curator to do such redundant and irrelevant work. Thus, I proposed a radical expansion of the show, and to my great surprise, my concept was accepted.



However, you cannot escape a kind of author-fixation when you position one artist's work at the center of any project, however much complexity you want to bring in. I wasn't particularly aware of this before I did the show.

*The show stirred an unexpected uproar, and you had to face criticism from various sides. The show might have been problematic, but it certainly has raised many questions that were put aside for a long time, which is very revelatory and refreshing. What impact did this curatorial experience have on your own work?*

As you probably know, the show became a target of harsh criticism not only from conservatives or anxious men, but also from feminists themselves, and I admit that I became very disillusioned with institutionalized forms of feminism. To say this is not to say that I am not still devoted to a feminist point of view. I still am, but what I've found out is that some forms of institutionalized feminism play a "right/wrong" game that I want nothing to do with because it is as masculinist as everything it is supposed to undermine. There are groups of people that are in power, and they dictate to everyone what he or she is supposed to think and talk about; feminism is unfortunately no exception to this tendency. And if you are a "bad girl" and decide to talk about a taboo subject such as the *Dinner Party* in a non-condemning way, you get punished. As an intellectual that's exactly the kind of party-line *status quo* I try to dismantle all the time. However, I should say that some artists who I invited to participate in the show, and who one might expect to follow this party-line strategy and to refuse showing "around" Chicago, such as Mary Kelly, clearly understood that *Sexual Politics* was not about reinforcing Chicago's fame or notoriety, but a curated show with many historical and interpretative layers.

*Curatorial or artistic circles have certain specificities, and I wonder if you feel that this kind of "party-line" institutionalization of feminism exists in academia as well?*

What I was saying before is partly a reflection of an academic institutionalization. The two structures - art institutions such as museums or galleries and academia - are intimately related.

*The exhibition Sexual Politics included only women artists. On the one hand, all/only-women art shows are often criticized for a separatism that reinforces the gender dichotomy. On the other hand, feminist artists included in mostly male shows risk being once again incorporated into masculine ideology. Is the category "woman" a sufficient premise for grouping art works in a museum or gallery? According to your opinion and experiences, what are the best curatorial strategies in this context?*

All these questions really depend on what you as a curator are trying to do. If you

want to organize a show of feminist art, it is going inevitably to be an all-women show, unless you include one of those few men who have overtly devoted themselves to a feminist project, but you can count these male artists on one hand (for instance, Victor Burgin would be one of them). Even though some would disagree with me, I believe that in all its diversity the category “feminist” almost entirely excludes men. I did not deliberately exclude men from this category; but men themselves, for various reasons, do not tend to ally themselves with feminism. I would have been happy to include men into the show, but there were none of them back in the 1970s whose work played any role in feminist discourse. At least there are none I know of. In the case of a show that wasn’t focused on feminism, however, I would be less comfortable with excluding men because the category “woman” easily allows the political dimension to shrink into a mere biological code. A show that tried to break the boundary between feminism and men was a bi-coastal show *Bad Girls* curated by Marcia Tucker and Marcia Tanner in 1995; it presented work by men who were playing around with sexuality, and that’s not necessarily a feminist project. So this strategy may have raised more questions than it answered.

*But don’t you think that at the turn of the twentyfirst century it seems almost impossible to strictly separate gender politics and sexual politics?*

It is definitely true now, but it wasn’t so when *Bad Girls* was organized, and the historical context has to be taken into consideration. It is much more difficult to make such a separation now, especially when you look at artists under the age of thirty. Feminism has so thoroughly permeated the art world and art discourse that a lot of artists don’t even realize that that’s what they are doing. Needless to say, this absence of feminist consciousness in a visibly feminist project brings up another set of problems.

*You are saying that feminism has permeated the art world, but look at American museums and their collections, which still include only a very small amount of works by women, and this inequality could be traced also in contemporary art exhibitions. It seems apparent that a patriarchal bias survives in art institutions! How can we resist this tendency?*

You are right; my comment about the permeation of feminism has more to do with certain visual and conceptual strategies than with the mechanisms of art institutions that, after all, help to define both cultural politics and criteria of aesthetic values. Since the beginning of the feminist art movement, there have been debates about whether to try to break into bastions of male privilege, or to look for alternative sites that enable women artists to speak for themselves more easily. There are still voices that call for the second possibility; others exploit the liberalism of sites such

as university galleries. To a certain extent, they are right about the level of freedom, but, if we like it or not, art showed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York will most probably have a much larger impact on people's consciousness than the same art displayed at some liberal college campus. Thus I believe we have to try to use both types of venues.

But you mentioned collecting strategies, and that's a quite different case. Although there have been a few quasi-feminist shows held in such a conservative institution as MoMA such as *Sense and Sensibility: Women Artists and Minimalism in the 90s* (1994), they had a minimal impact on collecting policies, and we should keep this in mind. Challenging women artists' under-representation in art history directly under the roof of a renowned institution will, sooner or later, enlighten even its trustees. It might sound too optimistic, but without trying to break into bastions of dominant ideology women's art will always be marginalized and will be left unrecognized.

*Then do you think that Western feminism hasn't been consequential enough, or that thirty years is just too short time for substantially changing the entire cultural and social "order"?*

I don't think it is a fault of feminism. We have to look at feminism within a wider context of contemporary culture, and realize that the commercial marketing of "femininity" evident in examples such as Madonna has diffused the significance of women's emancipation agenda. Feminism (together with other rights discourses) has become a target of commodification and recuperation. To be swallowed by a mainstream is, sadly enough, an effect of certain capitalist mechanisms.

*It was in your article "Post-Feminism: A Remasculinization of Culture?" published in May 1990 in M/E/A/N/I/N/G, where you criticized this recuperation of feminism back into a mainstream - the white, Western, male, humanist or critical theory model. You argued that 'we must be wary of this gesture of inclusion, resisting the masculinist seduction that produces feminism as subsumed within a critical postmodernist or genderless universalist project. We must refuse what Jane Gallop calls "the prick" of patriarchy, which operates to remasculinize culture by reducing all subjectivity to the "neutral subject".' However, isn't it also true that it was mainly the poststructuralist feminist theorists related to the so called postfeminist movement who have broadened the context of feminist studies and through whom feminist discourse entered more significantly the academia? What can you say about this discrepancy?*

I agree with your note about poststructuralist feminism but I would argue that it is not the same as postfeminism. In that article, I wanted to comment on a discourse

that I saw percolating mainly in the New York art world - one that called itself postfeminism. The very term postfeminism implies that it comes after feminism, and as such it was broadly and often manipulatively used as a manifestation of the “death” of feminism. Poststructuralist feminism, by contrast, is deeply embedded in feminism that is “alive.” I criticized an easy conflation between postfeminism and postmodernism not so much because it was influenced by a then fashionable prefix “post” applied to practically everything, but rather because it suggested a collapse of feminism into a more or less mainstream philosophy of the 1980s. Moreover, the term postfeminism was mainly used by male critics, and that’s very telling. Although you now rarely see this term popping out in critical writing, the appropriation of feminism by the mainstream continues to happen in different ways even today. The popular culture industry produces a commercial and highly sexualized idea of the woman in power and this is only one of the forms of this appropriation. I am not saying that this is to be explicitly condemned, because even this serves as a power model for girls and women in this country, but we have to keep in mind that it is a model that is defined by a traditional notion of woman as a merely sexual being.

However, we can trace the process of emptying the concept of feminism even in academia. While some ten years ago titles of publishers such as Routledge were filled with the term feminism, the same term is rarely seen among their book titles now. It almost seems that feminism has become a vacuous concept. Discussions about race, ethnicity, or class are much more visible. Undoubtedly, postcolonial, race, or queer theories and the whole notion of interdisciplinarity are very important, but when you start to include them into feminism, you run a risk that feminism will be overwhelmed. After all, feminism is very fragile concept today, and we have to be very careful about diluting it with other discourses.

*Yes, but we also have to be careful about excluding geographical, cultural and political differences from feminism because then, all of a sudden, we could appear in the trap of universal feminism, or feminist universalism. As an East European, I am a bit suspicious about such a difference-reducing attitude. I don’t want to use too strong words, but if we don’t acknowledge a variety of differences among women, we can end up with a kind of globalist feminist colonialization.*

Everything I am talking about is very specific to the U.S.A., and that’s certainly very problematic. Not only that there is a huge heterogeneity among women’s lives and work in various places, but there are also countries where feminism hasn’t even brushed the surface. But perhaps it is just this uneven and complex situation that could reinforce my argument against the legitimacy of the neutralization of feminism. Before claiming the “post” phase of feminism in the West, it is important to realize that feminism hasn’t done any job at all elsewhere. And again, I believe that it hasn’t done its job here yet either.

*A critique of representation is undoubtedly one of the key issues for feminist art history and criticism. Since Laura Mulvey's 1975 essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in which the dominance of the male gaze over the female body as a passive looked-at object was challenged, many feminists uncompromisingly denied visual spectacle, as if feminist art was supposed to resist the desirous male gaze at any cost. Remarkably, within the last few years, this duality of looking/being looked-at was questioned by a number of feminist scholars who have usually argued that the constitution of subjectivity has to be analyzed in a more complex way than conceiving the image as a purely social construct. As this reconsideration of one of feminism's dogmas can be traced among academics, a reemergence of sexual pleasure also appears among a significant number of contemporary women artists.*

*It seems very interesting to me that some of these revisionist feminist scholars are returning back to phenomenology, calling for the revitalization of human agency, bodily investment into space, and performative and interactive practices as crucial premises for the constitution of a subject. Your essay on the work of Cindy Sherman that was published in the 1997 catalogue of the artist's retrospective is an exemplary case of bringing together feminism and phenomenology. In this text, you proposed a new relationship of subject/object engagement that is linked to the phenomenological idea of the chiasmus. As you put it, it is 'the way in which embodied subjects intertwine through the regime of a visibility that itself turns the world into flesh. That is, while one subject sees another, the subject in seeing is also seen and so made flesh'. In other words, the structure of the self in your feminist-phenomenological reading is related to a 'modality of reflexivity' in which the subject is always in reciprocal relationship to the other. It is true that through this reading we can better understand the disempowering effect of returning the look back towards the viewer, but I still wonder how the notion of intersubjectivity is connected to the political agenda of feminism?*

If we rethink the reductive model of power as a coalition and activism-based one, and open it up towards a wider range of intersubjective relations, even the concept of politics will become richer and more complex. Specificity and change of social structure is not only about turning the hierarchy upside down, but it also involves more subtle and intimate things connected to our bodies, desires and mental processes. It is a subjectivity in a dialogical form that some people, including myself, are now trying to grasp. I hope that this approach could help us to reconceive how we relate to otherness, whether it would be the otherness in ourselves, or in our own culture, or elsewhere. Even when Laura Mulvey's model was first introduced into feminism it was clear that there was something overly limiting about it. But while this model served an important purpose for some time in the 1970s and 1980s, it started to be painfully insufficient in the next decade.

In my recent work, I have thus begun to analyze how to understand the experience

within a mutable set of social, cultural, but also bodily relationships, for which I used a range of examples from both modern and contemporary art. The phenomenological perspective to which I've turned provides me as a writer and critic with a fuller way of comprehending the self-other relationship. To put it more precisely, as an individual who is writing, for instance, about artists of color I try to reform myself in relation to each of these artists. That's what I call a "chiasmatic" relationship - we are in a process of constant change *vis-à-vis* others. Furthermore, the chiasmus allows us to see the role of the interpreter in constituting the meaning of the artwork in relation to the artist (who becomes "other" in this instance). It is for me a way of breaking down not only the problems of patriarchy, but also of 1970s and 1980s feminisms, neither of which wanted to acknowledge the participation of a theorist in constituting their object of study. If psychoanalysis provided an important background for 1980s feminism, I believe that phenomenology could provide something similar to late-1990s and early twentyfirst century feminism.

*But psychoanalysis can also be traced even in your recent work. Do you see a link between Jacques Lacan, who you sometimes refer to, and phenomenology?*

Despite my linking of psychoanalysis to a certain period of thinking, it continues - in revised models - to be crucial; there is a very intimate relationship between, especially, Lacan and Merleau-Ponty. Lacan's theory is, unfortunately, often used in a very reductive way that flattens his extremely rich notion of the formation of the subject to purely visual schemes. But if we reread Lacan, we can see that he didn't conceive of this formation in the straight-forwardly defined manner that was assigned to him by contemporary theorists interested in the gaze and visibility. For a long time, phenomenology was almost a taboo among American scholars, including feminists. Arguing against this rejection of phenomenology, we also shouldn't forget that one of the first important feminist voices in this century was of Simone de Beauvoir who was, like Lacan, deeply invested in phenomenology.

*Bodily and sensual experiences of space and time and direct theatrical enactments of subjects in relation to one another are related to a radical rethinking of traditional works of art, such as painting or sculpture. Body and performance art, earth works, or happenings belong to the most innovative and critical art forms that emerged in the revolutionary atmosphere of the 1960s. Recently, you published one book and coedited another, both of them focused on performance art. Why are you so much drawn to this practice?*

Precisely for the reasons you are pointing out. As I argue in my book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998), the ways in which artists deal with their own body paralleled the ways in which theorists negotiate their own texts and corporeality.

This notion also informed my methodology in the book. Instead of using theory as a structure into which a work of art is simply placed, I suggested that the theory could be found within a work of art itself. Looking at art of a certain period could thus be as theoretically revealing as reading a theoretical text from around the same time.

*In your book on performance and body art, you also discuss very recent projects that follow the legacy of the 1960s neo-avant-garde. There are authors who argue that the avant-garde comes back in some contemporary art practices. Would you agree with this opinion?*

I believe that the term “avant-garde” has to be discarded at this point because it refers to a culturally but also historically and politically very specific structure. Peter Bürger’s notion about the avant-garde as an advanced group of artistic radicals that dichotomizes itself from normative culture is certainly very seductive, but we should realize that, for better or worse, that’s not the way culture works. Especially not now. Moreover, I think that in the moment when the avant-garde gets defined, it gets also commodified and becomes a part of a marketable structure. We have seen this happening an infinite number of times.

*If you can make such a comparison, how different are performance and body art now as opposed to in the 1960s and 1970s?*

They are different in many respects. While thirty years ago artists were still very fond of relating themselves to the model of the avant-garde, the younger artistic generation today does not have any such tendency. I don’t want to sound cynical, but if you spend fifteen minutes at any art school you can quickly understand that the current emphasis is much more about positioning oneself in the market structure than about revolution; some artists want to undermine it, some want to undermine it by being part of it, some don’t ask themselves questions like that, but all of them, one way or the other, acknowledge that they are working within this structure. That’s just to finish my point about the avant-garde. As to the forms of articulating the body, contemporary artists have moved away from a simple, presentational type of bodywork that, for instance, Vito Acconci was doing. Instead, they deal much more with a fragmented, dislocated body, an already represented body rather than a rough corporeality. This shift is related to the strong impact of new technology and the media.

*Still, despite many recent critiques of modernism and the avant-garde, it cannot be denied that some critical avant-garde practices have become crucial for a radical reconceptualization of art and art history within the last two decades - especially those that either challenged the art establishment or were related to identity politics. In this context, the legacy of Marcel Duchamp seems to be a crucial one for the closure of traditional aesthetics, and his significance has become apparent even in the*

*recent “Duchampian” bibliography: David Joselit, Infinite Regress: Marcel Duchamp, 1910 - 1941 (1998); The Duchampian Effect (1996); or your own Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp (1994). Why this focus on Duchamp? And how do you conceive of a link between Duchamp and new gender or feminist theories of art?*

Perhaps surprisingly, I think the relationship between Duchamp and feminism is a very tenuous one. And if his interest in self-invention, in constructing intriguing appearances and in identity games was important for some contemporary artists, it was more so for artists of an older generation. Even in the Duchamp book, I was attracted to a gender transformation of Duchamp alias Rose Sélavy as a significant cultural phenomenon around 1920. What I did was to use Duchamp very willfully as part of a feminist project, but I am far from suggesting that Duchamp was a feminist. It was a kind of appropriation of Duchamp on my side, if you want, but my negotiation was one of fascination, and I hope that it was also theoretically and historically challenging. Another aspect that was important for me to think about was Duchamp’s construction of the self in relation to artists like Andy Warhol or Cindy Sherman.

*During our interview we have touched upon various forms of appropriation, and this idea takes me to my last question, and, indirectly, back to the very beginning. Judy Chicago and Edward Lucie-Smith just published a book entitled Women and Art: Contested Territory (1999) that popularizes the legacy of feminist art and art history. With publications like this one, the wider audience gets access to issues that are usually either marginalized or enclosed within a purely academic environment. It is also true, however, that the anti-elitist attempts of such publications very often lead to a depoliticization as well as simplification of otherwise complex issues - the price that is thus paid is usually related to obvious commercial interests of large publishing houses. Isn’t this kind of popularization yet another way of appropriating or smoothly incorporating feminism into patriarchal structures, what you might call a remasculinization?*

I had many debates with Chicago about this issue of populism - we disagree on this. She respects what I do, but she thinks I make a terrible mistake of being overly intellectual, and, from her point of view, so arcane. However, to be “populist” without oversimplification is extremely difficult - I’m certainly not good at it. This book is in some way linked to *The Power of Feminist Art* (1994) edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, and they both are not only very accessible, but also very important because they provide women an easy access to a part of their own history. And yet, books like this, which are published in tens of thousands of copies, articulate a kind of history that is very narrow and could be misleading. The real goal, perhaps, is to embrace all kinds of feminist writing. There are different audiences, and the more complex - “arcane” - history needs to be told as well.



**Amelia Jones** is Professor and Pilkington Chair in Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Manchester. Besides teaching, she works as an independent curator and writer. Among her most important exhibitions are *Photography and the Photographic: Histories, Theories, Practices* (1994) and controversial *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History* (1996), organized at Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and accompanied by an extensive catalogue she also edited. Jones's essays appeared in a number of important publications, such as *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action*, Joanna Frueh, Cassandra L. Langer, and Arlene Raven, eds. (New York: IconEditions, 1994), or *Women in Dada*, Naomi Sawelson-Gorse, ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), to name just a few. She is an author of several books, *Postmodernism and the En-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp* (1994), *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 2004). Her book *Self Image: Technology, Representation, and the Contemporary Subject* is being published in 2006-7 by Routledge. Together with Andrew Stephenson, she co-edited an anthology of texts on performance and body art called *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999). In 2003, she edited *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge). Her other edited anthology is *A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* that includes 27 original essays, and is just out from Blackwell Press. As a writer, Jones collaborates with magazines such as *Art History*, *Art Journal*, *Art + Text*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, or *Oxford Art Journal*, and is a co-editor and co-author of *WomEnhouse* ([www.cmp.ucr.edu/womenhouse](http://www.cmp.ucr.edu/womenhouse)), a web project re-examining feminism and domesticity in contemporary culture.

## *Aesthetics and Sexual Politics*

### Painterly and Critical Pleasures

**Mira Schor**

*In the beginning of the 1970s, you had a wonderful opportunity to participate in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts, the first program of this kind in history. The program, directed by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, was crucial for both challenging the patriarchal system in art and art education, and building the importance of women artists. How was your experience at CalArts, and how did it influence your artistic and theoretical work?*

I had a dual experience at CalArts, and both aspects of it are equally important and deeply formative. My encounter with feminism was unique and it turned out to be a life-long commitment. However, my experience in the Feminist Art Program in Fresno was also a difficult one and I left the Program at the end of my first year. While I want to stress that I see it as a kind of “leadership training program” of political awareness that I was privileged to have participated in, there were moments when the feminist agenda, or rather, the curriculum that my female colleagues and I had to go through, was psychologically so intense that we felt more traumatized than empowered. Like any kind of new group political or social situation, even the consciousness raising as practiced by our teachers was exciting, but also dangerously tense and even manipulative. Even though most of the things we did were extremely important for grounding our feminist subjectivity, at the time I considered some of them unnecessary, and certainly very upsetting, because they involved some thought-control aspects as well.

Part of the problem might have been caused by our teachers who were both very enthusiastic, but also relatively inexperienced in dealing with certain kinds of intense psychological situations that their pedagogic experiment was likely to create. For instance, during our consciousness raising sessions - and I should say that I

think it is a very valuable and important process for any subjugated subject - we had to speak about issues such as our relationship to our mother, our father, or our own body. We all had very different social and class backgrounds, and listening to myself and to other women significantly altered my understanding of women as the "other" - and other not only to men but also to themselves. Yet, as an example of the potentially traumatizing aspect of the experience, one day, Judy Chicago decided that to get a different perspective to our mothers we should get around in a circle, and start saying "Mommy, mommy!" My father had died when I was eleven, and had never been apart from my mother before for such an extensive period of time, and I was very homesick. Just saying "mommy" aloud made me very emotional, but I joined the group and did what we were told to do. But, when Judy told us to imagine our mother's funeral, I started weeping, and another girl simply flipped out. Our art teachers wanted us to become strong women, but they were not licensed therapists to perform such psychological experiments on their students!

As I said before, while feminism has become a crucial part of my life, a lot of Feminist Program students were so traumatized by this domination that they have never been able to find a path to incorporate feminism into their lives, no matter what they do in these days (several are practicing artists and others are professional women). Only a few have grown within feminism and kept up with changes within it. And, despite my public association with feminism, I still find it hard to expand from a loose, more or less familial network of women and become part of some larger political machine of the women's movement.

*It is interesting that while speaking about the beginnings of women's art movement in the States, you are pointing out another form of women's psychological subordination, this time among women themselves. It makes me think how the relatively recent feminist art history can be uncritically glorified because Chicago's and Schapiro's program is usually considered as a key event in constituting women's art movement in the States but its own bias remains unchallenged. Just look at books like The Power of Feminist Art (1995), edited by Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, which is a wonderful source of information about the feminist art movement in California, but it also puts the legacy of CalArts on a pedestal.*

You are right to comment on an absurd discrepancy between empowerment and domination, and, as you can see, it still bothers me. It is incredibly difficult to be a leader of any movement or philosophy that is based on critiquing an existing power mechanism, because you might very likely start using the very mechanisms yourself. But without leader figures, where would feminism and other critical movements be? It is a paradox that will always be here, but we have to learn how to resist the seduction of power. As to the book you mentioned, it focuses on California, which obviously makes it very particular. For various reasons, there is much less written

about the feminist art movement that started in New York, and it is true that East Coast history was very different from the West Coast history. However, there are a lot of other books written from other geographical or theoretical points of view than *The Power of Feminist Art*, and even though this is a huge and eye-catching volume that has had great distribution, it doesn't have to be suspected of any hegemony. Besides, the history of CalArts is usually warped to favor the "post-studio" influence of John Baldessari and erase the Feminist Art Program, so it is necessary to reemphasize it.

*Although one can hardly make a strict distinction between art, psychology and politics in the case of the Feminist Art Program, I still wonder what were you there taught as artists?*

We did some of the earliest work studying women artists of the past, we did a lot of work (in part, through consciousness-raising) on changing what could be appropriate subject matter and form (including the use of new, non-high art materials and performance art) for visual art. I have to admit that despite the amazing amount of energy and inspiration I received in the program, I didn't think the artistic level was very high. Yet, when I entered the program, I already knew a number of important women artists working in New York, including Pat Steir and Yvonne Jacquette, and my mother, Resia Schor, was a working artist as well, but a lot of the other students had no experience at all with women's art, or even art in general. This easily led to a disturbingly mythifying notion that what Judy and Miriam were teaching us had no precedent or comparison in the art world when maybe the other students may have had no other framework for comparison. Any myth can be exploited, and I'm worried that that was happening in some cases in the Feminist Art Program as well.

However, the reason I left after one year was more complex. I wanted to experience other aspects of the school, which was one of the most extraordinary and experimental art education institutions in the States at that time. The Fluxus movement and the conceptual art movement with their anti-object and anti-market orientation, were very strong at CalArts. People like Allan Kaprow, Emmett Williams, Alison Knowles, Simone Forti, and John Baldessari taught there, as well as the sculptor Stephan Von Huene who I worked with after I left the Program. One didn't necessarily have to work with each one: they gave a "flavor" to the entire institution, and their conceptual and yet playful and somehow whimsical attitude towards art made a great impact on my work as well.

*The first generation of feminist artists was criticized for essentialism, and Judy Chicago's theory of the central-core imagery, which was promoted at CalArts, was certainly one of the most exemplary cases of codifying a female aesthetics. Even though the character of your current work is far more complex than a somehow*

*reductive concept of the 1970s “vaginal art”, it still carries some of its marks. How would you reflect the controversy around essentialism from your perspective today, and does anything like a feminine aesthetics exist?*

Let me start with a big loop. My father, Ilya Schor, was a Polish artist who came to the U.S.A. during the World War II as a refugee from Hitler. The only recording that I have of his voice comes from an American radio program in Yiddish, which considered the question, ‘Is there a Jewish art?’. Since I don’t speak Yiddish, I didn’t understand exactly what my father was saying. The only thing I did understand was my father’s answer to this very question. He said that Jewish art is characterized by ‘*eine melodie*’, a melody, and I believe that there is something in art done by women, preferably consciously but maybe often also unconsciously, that is a reflection of their experience in this world, and this experience cannot be shared by men. I know that this is a point in which I can get into trouble over the question of essentialism, but I think this experience is deeply embodied, but also deeply socialized.

However, these days it is hard to distinguish the work you see on the premise of gender, perhaps precisely because one of the things that were historically so significant about the feminist art that was done in the 1970s was that it opened the door to content, techniques, and materials that were not allowed into fine art during the high period of modernism - mostly non- or low-art means associated with domesticity, or corporeality. Once the new meanings and forms that feminism inaugurated were “out”, then everybody was given permission to explore and use that language - including men. Both heterosexual and gay male artists started to work with this language, and since the field has expanded across genders and sexualities, to speak about “feminine” or “women’s” aesthetics or subject matters could be very misleading. But the information went both ways. Back then, women artists, including myself, were intrigued by the challenging strategies of conceptual and body/performance artists, and many of these were men - Lawrence Weiner, Vito Acconci, and others; this makes the situation around the strategies of feminist art - political and body engagement, performativity, etc. - even more complicated. However, feminist art and “feminine” aesthetics are not necessarily the same thing, and they should not be mixed up. And yet, even though I would say it is hard to distinguish between the work by women and men, sometimes I am struck by characteristics of certain women artists’ work that speaks so specifically about women’s lives and sensibilities. The explanation for this is certainly both culturally obvious and yet beyond words.

As to the question of essentialism, I am quite sick of it after all these years, but it continues to haunt me - or dog me! I am convinced that this question is much more complex than most of its critics would want to admit. First, feminist artists in the 1970s never thought of themselves as being “essentialist”, because this term was not prevalent within the feminist context in the U.S.A. at the time. Essentialism as

a term, and a condemnatory label, was applied to us by the next generation. It is a historical interpretation. Also, the practice of feminist art was very complex and diverse in the 1970s. Women artists painted or sculpted central-core images, but they also explored language, or worked in video and performance. Thus to label the whole period, or movement, with essentialism is incredibly flattening and reductive. For us, our bodies were totally interrelated with a social construction of gender (even though the very term “gender” wasn’t used much back then either), and what we aimed for was social change, not a celebration of women’s biological “destiny”, so to speak. We considered the social to be strongly embodied, and vice versa, the body being socially constructed. Performance art was very important for many women artists in this country, and I think this was one of the most significant elements that marked the first wave of American feminist art.

I am not defending everything that was done during the first decade of the feminist art movement in this country. Like in any period and in any artistic tendency, some of it was powerful, and some of it was simply bad. But “bad” feminist art wasn’t bad because it used a bit more “essentialist” language. As to my own work, the fact that I am often seen as an essentialist is also connected to my involvement in painting practice, because many feminist artists and critics who came a bit later see painting as a less challenging, conformist, and market-oriented medium. In their strong critique of pleasure, the 1980s feminists often attacked painting as a pleasure-based visual practice that escapes political and social issues. Of course, painting deals with, among many other things, form, color and gesture, and is more marketable than, let’s say, conceptual art. Moreover, the adoration of male painters and the prices of their works have been truly ridiculous in the U.S.A. And yet, to despise or degrade painting as a site for feminist practice is a dogma as well.

*You said that the women’s art movement influenced male artists. Yet most art historians or art critics make us believe that it is almost exclusively men from whose art other artists’ work derive. It is men, not women, whose work is taken as a referential point in history. In one of your essays, you called this a historical patrilineage...*

I wrote an essay entitled “Patrilineage” for *Art Journal* back in 1991, which pointed to gendered flaws in art history and critical methodologies, but reading contemporary art criticism and history, I don’t think that this male-oriented reading of our past and present has improved much. I updated the essay once already, in 1994, for republication in an anthology called *New Feminist Criticism: Art/Identity/Action*. Unfortunately, I could probably write still another update with a futuristic note “To be continued...”.

*In 1996, you participated in a highly controversial show Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History that was curated by Amelia Jones and*

*presented at the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. The show was accused of being pornographic and essentialist, of heroizing Chicago, and many other “bad” things. However, what is much more interesting to me than discussing these accusations is the relationship between sexuality and politics that was incorporated into the title of the show. After I saw more of your pieces today I realized that it is this alliance that plays a crucial role in your work. How do sexuality and politics come together?*

For me this relationship is totally natural. One of the positive things that came out of the philosophy of the last twenty years is an analysis of culture as having an ideological dimension. Thus according to this concept, and I deeply believe in it, everything is political. The most frequently quoted thought of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s was ‘The Personal is the Political’. The “neutrality” of art and art history before the 1970s, when it was radically called into question for the first time, was strongly political because even terms such as “universal”, “timeless”, or “neutral” are ideological.

Art and art history have always had sexual politics. Just look at the most obvious example of the tremendous amount of female nudes in Western art. The only difference is that it was not perceived or interpreted as such. Instead, all sorts of apolitical, asexual, genderless, and thus also ahistorical models were applied to culture. Not only has art always dealt with sexual politics but it also has had a strong sexualized aspect, which is particularly important for painting. Historically, only one sex was privileged to experience and enact the sexualized aspect of painting, but it shouldn’t mean that this dimension has to be destroyed, just problematized and redeployed. The sexual and other bodily energies that painting provokes so strongly should also be explored and used by women painters. I simply see no way how to strictly separate a gendered agenda from sexuality. We have to work with both social construction and corporeality.

*The exhibition Sexual Politics included only women artists. On the one hand, “women-only” shows are often criticized for a separatism that reinforces the dominance of gender dichotomy. On the other hand, feminist artists included in mostly male shows risk once again being incorporated into the masculine ideology. Is the category “woman” an efficient and meaningful premise for grouping art works in a museum or a gallery, and how do you as an artist feel about it?*

I don’t mind being included in all-women shows. My work has often been displayed in such a context, and even though it can be problematic, I usually tend to accept this because it reflects both my personal and my professional history. When *The Power of Feminist Art* came out, the editor of *Ms.* magazine asked me to consider why there wasn’t a museum exhibition that would show an equally extensive and

diverse amount of work by feminist artists. She suggested that I, as an author of one of the essays in the book, could write a piece that would address this issue. And I did in a piece called “Waiting for the Big Show” where I tried to imagine what this hypothetical exhibition would be like, what problems it would examine and if it could be done at all.

One of the topics I dealt with was whether men should be involved in such a survey exhibition, which also led me to consider the phenomenon of feminist art made by men. For me, however, the trouble with including men in a feminist art show is that, traditionally, the male presence makes women either peripheral once again, or weakens the political agenda of feminism as a movement of women’s liberation, or, simply, reduces the importance of women’s legacy and women’s linkages in art history. Yet a good feminist art show could be done both ways - with or without men, but the curator would have to be very aware of the risk of eliminating the feminist content. Moreover, not every all-women show is necessarily feminist.

You asked if the category “woman” is enough to hold together a show? No, as a selection criterion it is as insufficient and illegitimate as the category “man”. As anywhere else, there is good and bad art among women, or feminist artists, and so too in their shows.

*In your essay ‘Backlash and Appropriation’ published in the book The Power of Feminist Art, you wrote that ‘one of the major lessons of the feminist revision of the discipline of art history is the degree to which what had been put forth as an objective canon is in reality subjective and personal, riven with the prejudices and idiosyncrasies of individual art historians. For any art writer, developments in art history are crystallized in particular art works and events.’ Then, how can art history be written with the notion that it will always be only a fragmentary or a “lacking” story? And, moreover, how is art by women and other marginalized groups to be represented in this new art history without aspiring to becoming new masters and geniuses?*

The situation is very difficult because there has by now been established a sort of “secondary” canon of marginalized groups, including women, in art history, and I believe that this canon, coming out of poststructuralism, feminism, or even postcolonial studies, often turns to be as inflexible as the “first” canon. But instead of positioning the periphery into the existing discourse, and claiming their “mastership”, our aim should be to dismantle this very discourse of mastery, shouldn’t it? That was one initial goal of the feminist critique. Yet, knowledge of the traditional canon is the foundation of any challenging and constructive critique. We have to know well enough what we criticize before accepting criticism as the major tool of our work. Even though it might sound like a truism, using secondary sources and critical studies often forestalls knowing the primary sources and the



discourses that are targets of such criticism in this country. Also the art world is increasingly involved with emulating the celebrity structure of the broader cultural world, including popular mass media entertainment, and this only further encourages the notion of the “great artist,” whether it is a woman or a man. Writing the history of art is a discursive practice, and any change of perspective, or any attempt to introduce new “subjects” into it, calls for a new discourse. If we accept this, we also have to accept that the historical narrative will never be completed.

*From 1986 to 1996, you and Susan Bee published a magazine called M/E/A/N/I/N/G that, as you put it, was supposed to bridge the gap between the language of critical theory and the art object. We seem to agree that art can hardly be seen solely in the context of pure aesthetics, located outside of discursive practices. You just claimed that theories can be very self-centered, but without them many cultural stereotypes would remain compact and unquestioned. What is, in your opinion, the most effective bridge between theory, criticism, and art?*

Many artists read, write and do their art work at the same time. Also it doesn't have to be only theory that theorizes art and contains a discourse - art is not “dumb”, it produces by itself an amazing amount of ideas and discourses, and even though in most cases they are not explicitly verbally or textually pronounced, they are there. Through *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, we wanted to explore this two-folded process of theorizing art. We wanted to be very critical, but not for criticism's own sake. Thus our contributors were visual artists, poets as well as art critics and art historians, and it should be noted that this second group of contributors was given a chance to publish in our magazine what they couldn't publish elsewhere.

When *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* started, we didn't have enough money to print pictures. The primacy of textuality of a visual art magazine is rather ironic, but this condition led to a significant emphasis on description of art works in the text. Thus the meaning, theory, or criticism emerged from “reading” the visuality, and through this process of coding and decoding allowed language and the visual to come together. As an editor, I found artists writing about art being more eclectic in their interests and references, since most of them were autodidacts in this discipline, their attitude seemed to be less dogmatic and more flexible than the attitude of many renowned scholars. Their openness and absence of academic “burden” let them both make unexpected connections and be more sensually oriented. They could theorize without forgetting the experience of seeing, or touching, or smelling art - this sensual dimension is often lacking in the views of professionals in art history and theory. The most effective bridge between theory and art is hard to articulate strictly, but I believe it's related to trying to see and to think art every time anew. It's not about an innocent eye or mind; rather, it's about a combination of both sensual and intellectual experience that gives birth to criticality.

*This is a very pragmatic question, but how did you fund the magazine?*

We started the magazine by supporting it ourselves. Each of us, Susan and I, put \$500 into the first issue, and we did all the work: calling for papers, typing, graphic layout, etc. We were lucky because the first issue sold fairly well - mostly through subscriptions, and we made some of our money back. The next two issues were done in the same way. We did not publish any advertising. Later on, when the magazine started to have some impact on the artistic scene, we got grants from the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts. Yet, during all the ten years when *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* was published, we kept the budget very low. We chose these circumstances to keep our independence and personal touch with artists and writers who worked with us, even though, for instance, we could have found a university press that would have taken over a lot of the paper work and distribution. A real sense of community was absolutely crucial for us, and we didn't want to lose it.

*Even though you said that it is hard for you to become part of a huge machine of organized feminism, your work has reached a lot of people through M/E/A/N/I/N/G or otherwise. Criticality is in the center of all your activities, and you apply it to any kind of authority exercise, including feminism itself. Many times you convincingly pointed out that while attempting to dismantle male universalism, feminism often runs a risk of ending up in the trap of the same, 'replacing one system of exclusion with another.' I would add that as most new critical theories, feminism also runs another risk - of being appropriated by the mainstream. Is it possible to be rebellious and visible, or acknowledged, at the same time? In other words, can our work ever escape academicization, or institutionalization that usually disparages its critical edge?*

Any person who cannot help him/herself from critiquing power also cannot prevent him/herself from wishing to get some recognition. That's not only about the impossibility of completely escaping ideology, that's also about human nature. Whether we like it or not, to be critical in one's time and also to receive some sort of acknowledgement always requires a negotiation - with ourselves as well as with institutions that are in power. However, what I find as dangerous as being swallowed by the mainstream, is the arrogation of intellectual ownership of ideas by certain influential institutions that think of themselves as critical.

For instance *October* may be a bastion of poststructuralist and Marxist criticism, but it has become a power force as well. People connected to this magazine would certainly wish to deny that they have any power or are involved with deploying power in the art world. If most of *October's* contributors are recruited from circles that started to put cultural stereotypes and power mechanisms into question in the

1970s and 1980s, how do they deal with the fact that they gradually proposed themselves as owners of the most powerful intellectual “truth” and also that they exercised considerable influence on major mainstream art institutions? It is a signal problem of the 1968 generation. It’s the same as people who lose weight but still think they are fat - their self-image is an illusion, but for them it will always be reality! The question of who owns intellectual “truth” and thus dictates rules to the rest remains for me one of the most important questions of any critical discourse.

*The reconsideration of the legacy of Clement Greenberg, who promoted formalism and for whom painting was, among other things, also as an expression of male eroticism, became one of the key tasks for feminist artists, historians, and critics. However, it should also be noted that not only feminists but also many scholars connected to postmodernism and poststructuralism disowned, to a large extent, painting in the name of photography, video, or installation art. You seem to be one of a few feminist writers for whom the visual pleasure in painting is not necessarily in contradiction with undermining the patriarchal values in art. Could you explain it?*

Visuality is a much bigger phenomenon than the feminist critique of visual pleasure suggests - here I mainly refer to Laura Mulvey’s legacy. As a feminist, I am keen on analyzing and dismantling all the stereotypes of visual representation of the female body in history, which, undoubtedly, is closely linked to subjugation to women in society. However, even feminists occasionally admit that women do experience some pleasures in the traditional specular economy! They may not appreciate being exploited and denied subjectivity, but they do enjoy sexuality and beauty.

As a painter, I don’t care so much whether Courbet was expressing his - male - sexuality in his work: my own sexuality can interact with his vision. There is great energy in Courbet, and his paintings are fantastic. I appreciate what his paint strokes say about sexuality in general and especially about painting as a language. As a painter, I can get a lot of inspiration, material and energy from many male artists’ work, and, metaphorically speaking, genetically alter it back into my artistic pleasure. What I am trying to do is to “captivate” you into looking at my paintings because of the way they are painted so that you can then be permeated by the pleasure I am talking about. I am very aware that by saying this I am indirectly asking to be marked not only as an essentialist, but as a formalist as well - the critique of painting seems to link the two. However, I believe that a physical or psychosomatic sensation that a painting transmits through its very facticity can be as liberating as a work of art using explicitly feminist slogans. What’s at stake is to enable women to see differently, to gain their own gaze (as supposed to being gazed at), to reach a visual and even sexual pleasure from pure looking, and not only to follow didactic manuals.

*Abstract painting has not been an area of feminist intervention. It seems that to explore non-representational painting in order to reclaim female authorship for abstraction is much more difficult than for “issue-based” art. You said just now that looking enables women to reach pleasure, but it does not necessarily arouse criticality. If abstract painting is inherently connected to pure visuality, how can it constitute a feminist critical practice?*

Unfortunately abstract painting has been disqualified by many feminists because feminism started as a political movement which favoured the critical analysis of iconography for its immediate political usefulness. Feminists who are abstract painters still complain that they are rarely included in major feminist art surveys, which shows that not much has changed about this disqualification. This phenomenon is partially related to the narrative structures that feminist writers need to articulate their arguments against patriarchal systems as it is much easier and appropriate to use “issue-based” art that allows for clear description and iconographic analysis than to use abstraction for the same purpose. Also abstraction leads one back to the essentialist problem through the Greenbergian legacy of essentialist ideas about the purity of disciplines, such as painting, and also through the sense of physical embodiment abstraction can suggest - through formal devices such as pouring, for example. Although no one seems to mind as much the spermatic interpretation of Pollock’s drips! I find this very problematic especially because such writing and interpretation usually deploys traditional narratives instead of calling them into question. What also could have helped to maintain the polarization between abstraction and feminism were some important early women abstract painters, such as Helen Frankenthaler, who were relentlessly uninterested in being in any way connected to feminism.

*I think I begin to understand what do you mean when you speak about visual pleasure entering into feminist consciousness. Your last comment also reminds me of a wonderful retrospective of Lee Krasner I recently saw in Los Angeles County Museum. Her refusal to fully adopt the dominant, and largely masculine language of Abstract Expressionism led her to remarkable experiments with collage and recycling her own work. Even though the character of these experiments might seem very formal and abstract, their meaning is much more complex - it reflects both dramatic events in Krasner’s own life, corporeality, mythology... In a way, some of her work anticipated postmodern semantic layering and multiplicity, and, unlike Frankenthaler, she sympathized with feminism. Commenting on her relationship with Jackson Pollock, she once angrily said that it is outrageous that people have easily appropriated the cliché that she is overshadowed by her husband, and don’t question it any more. To see her abstract work in that retrospective was truly revealing for me not only from a visual, but also from a feminist perspective.*

Abstraction and feminism are not as contradictory as it might first seem. Pleasure in painting, as I understand it, has nothing to do with beauty; it is a thrilling relationship between the visual and the conceptual that allows to see and to understand the world anew.

*With a recent revival of conservatism in this country, feminism has become again a dirty word for many people, or, as you put it, 'the ism that dare not speak its name'. Many young women artists do not associate themselves with feminism, even though their work challenges stereotypes related to patriarchal culture and society. The number of works by women artists in the collections of American museums is still very small, their market prices are far lower than the prices of male artists' work, and many other aspects of the dominant art apparatus give a clear sign that women are still discriminated. Isn't that rather ironic?*

It's tragic and frustrating. On the other hand, you have some six thousand years of repression against about one hundred and fifty years of development towards women having agency and subjectivity. We still live in a patriarchal society, we are still trained to be part of the system, and therefore we still pay a terrible price. Women have made enormous progress, especially in the last thirty years, but self-censorship that allows for recuperation continues to exist. The younger generation of women artists in the U.S.A. today is in a strange position. They have gained a lot from earlier women's movements, but they are also part of increasing professionalization of the field - they have skills and confidence that an earlier generation maybe didn't have. This combination makes them able to be "inside" in a relatively smooth way, and yet paradoxically their sense of entitlement reduces their critical potential and political consciousness.

If feminism is a critique of the center, then to be in the center naturally diminishes the meaning of feminism. For a young woman, distancing herself from feminism is a good career move, in part because it is a way of saying to the establishment, whether it is a public museum or a private art dealer, 'Don't worry, I won't question your power'. Recently, I saw a show of a young woman artist who claimed in her artist's statement, 'My work presents an apolitical world'. But there is no such a thing as an apolitical world - it's an oxymoron! For me, such a proclamation promises that the artist will be a good girl, maintaining the status quo. I think such women feel they are in control of the situation, because of their sense that so much has changed for the better that there is real equality of opportunity. Unfortunately, what most of young women artists don't realize is that there is still plenty of gender bias in this society, and however much I don't like numbers, the statistics speak clearly.

I don't want to adopt an annoyingly motherly "you'll see" role, but I stick with what I wrote in 'The *ism* that Dare Not Speak Its Name' that 'embracing the non-

feminist center also carries risk for the woman artist: that the new post-gendered universal of the center turns out to be the (male) universal of the past in which only feminist specificity can spare a woman artist from being subsumed by a male-oriented art history.' It would be a terrible mistake to lose what we have gained through so much struggle. Things are much better than they were in the 1960s, at least in this country, but we still have a long way to go.

**Mira Schor** is a painter and writer, she teaches in the MFA Program of the Fine Arts Department at Parsons The New School for Design and in the SVA in the MFA in Art Criticism Program. She was a participant in the Womanhouse project of the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in 1972, and she received her MFA from CalArts in 1973. Between 1986 and 1996, she and Susan Bee were co-publishers and co-editors of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a journal of contemporary art, which was an important tribune for a large number of feminist writers and critics. Schor wrote many texts on feminism and art. She is the author of a book of collected essays entitled *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), and co-editor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000). Recently, she also contributed to the exhibition catalogue *Painted Faces: Mary Cassat, Alice Neel, Karen Kilimnik* (Philadelphia: Moore College of Art and Design, 2002). She is currently working on a new collection of her writings and is editing *The Extreme of the Middle*, a collection of the writings of the abstract expressionist painter Jack Tworkov. As an artist, Schor exhibited her works in many one-woman and group exhibitions all over the United States. She is the recipient of a 1985 NEA grant in painting, a 1992 Guggenheim Fellowship in painting, and a 1997 Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant. She is also the recipient of the 1999 College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award in Art Criticism.

## *Aesthetics and Sexual Politics*

### Ripping Off the Emperor's Clothes

**Jo Anna Isaak**

*The impact of women artists on contemporary art has increased enormously within the last three decades. As a number of cultural critics, including Craig Owens and Arthur Danto, have noted feminism significantly contributed to the postmodern attempt to undermine the stereotypes on which post-Enlightenment society, art, and art history were based. Despite a recognition that “our” history, and the values that shape it, have been built on the asymmetrical power positions of the sexes, most public art institutions remain male-centered. The current curatorial strategy of MoMA still follows the famous 1932 diagram of Alfred Barr which unconditionally proposed a linear reading of art history, a reading which is a priori exclusive. If “affirmative action” is insufficient because it doesn’t challenge the gender politics of art institutions, what is then the most effective way to make women more visible without turning them into mainstream artists?*

Large American museums such as MoMA with their blockbuster shows are really, to a large extent, about power and financial speculation. They are playpens for the rich - places to have parties in. They have very little to do with art. I don't believe that any grass-roots-based political movement like feminism can penetrate those places. The level of financial outlay that goes on in these institutions is so big that it creates a kind of corporate model, and there are very few important museums in the U.S.A. that escape this limitation. If mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the current mayor of New York City, is generous to a museum, it is not because he is committed to supporting their programming, but because the board members of the museum supported his election campaign!

In New York City, I can think only of the New Museum of Contemporary Art (when it was directed by Marcia Tucker) as an example of an independent museum.

Although I am delighted to see art by women and by artists of color exhibited or purchased by major museums here and there, it happens too seldom to signify any crucial transformation in museum policy. You just have to think about what it means to have your programming governed by the rich and your revenues generate by tourists. It means you put on yet another Picasso and other “geniuses” show. It might sound cynical, but I see these institutions as comparable to the Academy in the nineteenth century - dinosaurs in decline.

Several artist, especially Hans Haacke and the Guerrilla Girls, have pointed out what is happening to museums, and for me this kind of “non-museum” work is far more interesting than the Picasso show in the museum. Currently, at least in this country, most of the interesting art projects take place outside of major museums - on the streets, in artists-run centers, alternative spaces, or in university galleries. This suggests there is “another” history of art which has nothing to do with the mainstream institutions and museums. Instead of the history of art, there are many histories of art in the making, and they sometimes don’t even meet.

*Let’s just look at the “millennial” exhibition Modern Starts in MoMA that includes work by 9 women among 176 artists! I don’t like statistics very much but the disproportion is very telling. Moreover, the visitors of this show can read wall texts like this one: “While artists have typically portrayed themselves or their male acquaintances with pensive, penetrating, or painted expressions, female faces are often represented as placid, calming, or slightly mysterious. Several of the works here exploit the psychological effects that the ‘eye contact,’ or the lack thereof, can have for the viewer. While a direct gaze from the subject of an artwork provokes feelings of psychological connection between that subject and the viewer, a subject’s averted eyes can suggest withdrawal or reverie... In the modern period artists continued to exploit the body’s inherent expressiveness. They also relied on many of the figurative contentions that had become familiar from the past, such as the reclining nude whose sinuous curves offer the viewer visual pleasure, or the penetrating portrait whose subject’s gaze resonates psychologically.” But such “facts” about modern art call for a critical comment from the perspective of women - artists, museum goers, etc.?*

Those sound better than most labels. You should have read the wall labels for the “Picasso’s Women” exhibition in MoMa in 1996. Those were hilarious - pure masturbation. However, interpretations such as this one only show that the sexual politics we have thought of, or rather been trained to think of, as incidental to the discourse of art history is central to its whole operation. And as Jenny Holzer put it “Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise.”

*We touched upon the representation of the female body, which dominated the*



*canonical works of art in the West; the female nudes were products of male originality and “divine” creativity. However, although women were a rich source of inspiration, they could not make art themselves for a long time. As you precisely put it, “without the image of women, the discourse (of art history) collapses.” Then, it comes as no surprise that it is the representation of women, femininity and female sexuality which most feminist theories of visual arts criticize as a sign of men’s control over women.*

*Even though I agree with this argument, I believe that the dual model of looking/being-looked-at is much more complex, and that not all distorted female nudes in modern painting are necessarily symbolic expressions of male artist’s desire to debase and torture the “weaker sex.” Images often look back at us, and some painted nudes return our voyeuristic look in a very self-confident way – just look at Manet’s Olympia. A simple duality of this interpretative model might more or less work before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it falls apart when we consider women artists who started represent female nudes at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup>-century. The separation between subject and object, and thus also between looking and being-looked-at, is one of the central dogmas of the modern epistemology which feminists themselves should shake off. Wide-spread feminist rejections of any depiction of nudity is connected to the anti-pornographic movement, but it also appears dangerously close to sexually oppressive dogma of both right-wing conservatism in the West and Communist ideology in the East. How do you as a feminist art historian deal with this paradox?*

Historically, it is interesting to look at Olympia as a kind of pivotal moment in the change of impositions, and perhaps even the beginning of women’s emancipation in the realm of both visual culture and modern society. Victorine Meurent’s look is unforgettable, and it certainly is not a look of a submissive personality. In terms of feminist art history, there are not many scholars who read the visual imagery in such a simplistic and didactic way as you suggested, but there may still be some. Dismantling this subject-object duality without losing the critical approach towards power mechanisms of visual representation is a difficult process, but when we look at contemporary art practices that’s exactly what many women artists successfully do. Literally or metaphorically, they rip off the emperor’s clothes in the most provocative manner, and their work speaks as much about sexuality as about ideology embedded in visual language. Still, using women’s bodies in the process of attacking clichés on which the visual culture is established is a risky and radical business, but when it is done well it can very effective. To appropriate the very language of what one wants to confront might be, after all, one of the most efficient forms of deconstruction, and could be applied to both pornography and conservative thinking of any kind. Right now a number of black artists are adopting this strategy in relation to the

stereotypes surrounding the representation of the black body. And it is not easy. Artists such as Robert Colescott, Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles face a lot of criticism in these days.

*In your book Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter (1996), I haven't found any example of non-representative art. All women artists whose work you discuss work in a figurative manner, or use language/text. As if you would want to suggest that abstraction and feminist art are mutually exclusive.*

My first book, *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Texts* (1986), was centrally engaged with the political implications of the development of abstraction in modernism. However, as to the absence of any discussion of abstract art in my book on feminism and art, except a brief historical discussion about women artists of the Russian avant-garde, you are right. I don't mean to imply that feminism and abstractionism are contradictory, but abstract painting was certainly not a common art practice amongst feminist artists in the 1980s, when I started to address it. A good analysis of contemporary women painters, some of whom are abstract, is by Mira Schor in her book *Wet* (1999). She gets into the Greenbergian demand for flatness and delimitation of space, and examines what impact this anti-illusionism had on women, and how their paintings related to body, space and pleasure.

*Psychoanalysis has become very popular among feminist scholars, including art historians, and your work is informed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well. Freud's analysis of dreams based on the premise of repressed desires and libidinal forces opens an interesting path to an examination of other forms of repression, even the patriarchal one. Lacan's "split subject," which is a result of symbolic and language productions, radically disturbs the traditional idea that people are biologically determined. Although both of these psychoanalysts can help us today to understand the cultural and social constructions of gender, they created very phallogentric theories. How can such these theories be applied to the feminist art history?*

You can't blame the mapmakers for the terrain. Freud and Lacan didn't create the phallogentricity of the culture we live in; they simply provided us with theories by which we can understand its operations. We were speaking earlier about a contemporary understanding of the gaze in Manet's Olympia. The same power dynamics were present in Manet's Olympia long before Lacan provided us with theories to understand their operations. It is true that whatever enabling theories women may be able to obtain from Freud or Lacan, they have had to wrest them

from the writings themselves. Most feminist scholars are engaged in a re-reading of psychoanalysis in order to make a new use of it. It is a tool, not a religion. Instead of taking psychoanalysis as gospel or something one has to believe in, one should use it as a tool for deconstructing sexual myths and gender stereotypes. If there is something in psychoanalytic theory that is really useful, it is what it tells us about the mechanisms of power that modern society deploys on everyday level. It shows us how the patriarchal system operates, and that is the point one has to start with while using Freud or Lacan.

For instance, Lacan's analysis of women's relationship to language - how femininity is embedded in language and how language structures position of the female subject - is extremely important for any feminist scholar who wants to understand gender construction. It doesn't matter what Lacan himself thought about women. What matters is what his theory has enabled women to discover about their position within language, and how this has helped them to challenge that position.

*It seems to me that some postmodern art historians and critics, including the feminist ones, started to mix up modernism and avant-garde. Lucy Lippard, for instance, argued that the character of feminist art is that "it can be aesthetically and socially effective at the same time," by contrast to the masculine avant-garde model, in which the creative isolation of the artist, out of touch with society, is valued. Similarly, Norma Broude emphasizes the formal obsession of the avant-garde, which strongly differs from the feminist art legacy. However, unlike the formalist hegemony of modernism, the main goal of the avant-garde was to blur the boundaries between art and life! The avant-garde might have run into troubles because it was too naive and utopian, but it wanted to challenge social realities and cultural myths. I agree that we must question the problematic role of women in the avant-garde movements (if these movements have accepted them at all), but I also believe that there are more affinities between feminism and avant-garde than many feminist scholars want to admit. After all, doesn't "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter", a subtitle of your book Feminism & Contemporary Art (1996), clearly speaks about this link?*

When you talk about "Art into Life," you are actually using a slogan of the Russian Avant-garde, and that idea has very different implications from how it was conceptualized, for example, in the U.S.A. or Western Europe. The avant-garde in Russia with its huge impact on both art and society has to be distinguished from an aestheticized form of the avant-garde, i.e. modernist formalism. In my book, I talk about how and why the women artists of the Russian avant-garde were more successful in making the connections between art and life than their male contemporaries. These women were much more interested in what could be

considered “low” art forms or crafts. They designed everyday objects such as dishes, clothing, or furniture and thus helped to build a “total” living environment. Consequently, these Russian women artists sometimes managed to transform a utopian concept into a practical reality. Also, in that period of time gender barriers were just blown away. No matter how brief this moment was, there was a genuine will for equality between men and women. What a time that must have been for both men and women! We should look at this episode as a model, fragile as it was, and realize that the avant-garde efforts in Europe and the U.S.A. were different: they were mostly male and patriarchal enterprises. However, as soon as the avant-garde in Russia was shut down, and socialist realism took over, women artists vanished. All of a sudden, there was no space for women because the new propaganda reinforced the old patriarchal control in both art and society.

To answer your question in contemporary terms, yes, I believe that there is a strong relationship between feminism and an avant-garde practices which leads us back to why women are not in the museums? But what do the museums have to do with either art or life? I might be cynical again but my answer is: very little. That is why you will find women artists rather out in the streets, dealing with the garbage, or the problems of landfills, toxic dump sites, water pollution, etc. This is what it means to bring art into life!

*What you just said about the Russian avant-garde shows how important it is to acknowledge historical and cultural specificity in various locations. It also shows that writing feminist art history, as any other history, should not be dominated by any explicitly defined model of interpretation. The question is: How can we use the legacy of Western feminism and gender studies in other geographical settings without introducing new versions of intellectual colonialism? How to reflect who we are with where we are, that is where we are positioned not only within power and authority hierarchies but also in relationship to other women?*

There is no doubt that the Western feminist model doesn't apply, for instance, to the East European setting, and as art historians we have to always respect this. When I started to travel to the Soviet Union about twenty years ago, I was meeting a lot of women artists who were members of the Union of Soviet Artists; and in Latvia, the head of the Artists Union was a woman. I realized that these women don't need to import Western feminism. Not that they don't have their own troubles with gender inequality, but these troubles were of a different kind than those I knew from the West. What they needed, and most probably do need even today, is to find their own way of approaching feminism.

*Part of your scholarly interest is focused on Eastern European art. You have visited the former Soviet Union several times, and the entire chapter of your last*

*book is devoted to Russian women artists. As you know, feminism is received rather awkwardly in that part of the world, which even reinforces the phallo(go)centricity of many academic disciplines, including art history. How did you end up writing about women artists in the world behind the "iron curtain?"*

In 1980, when I was graduate student, a friend who was an art critic was invited to Moscow for the opening of the exhibition *Paris-Moscow 1900-1930*, and he invited me along. Ironically, his visa didn't come through but mine did, so I went by myself. I arrived to Moscow to see the exhibition but the opening was delayed for a week. With the help of one of the French curators I was allowed into the Pushkin Museum for the whole week while the workers and curators were installing the show. I was in heaven. I spent the whole week surrounded by works of art, some of which had not been seen since the 1920s.

Interestingly enough, most of the people installing the show turned out to be artists themselves and they would take me back home with them in the evening. Back then Western visitors were rare birds. That's how I hooked up with Soviet art circles. I realized that I wanted to continue to work on this art and I began to apply for some exchange programs. As a Canadian, I had much better chance to travel in Soviet Union than most Americans. First, it was mainly women artists of the Russian avant-garde I studied there. However, I got to meet many women working in the museums, and through them I was introduced to a number of wonderful contemporary women artists, and started to systematically learn about their work. Although Soviet society - as I remember it - was overwhelmingly dominated by men and probably very sexist, artists seemed to have a space of their own. At least some of them. And, in a way, I was lucky enough to come there during the 1980s, which was a much more liberal period for artists than it used to be in the beginning of the Cold War and - it seems to me - a lot more interesting than it is now.

*I love to hear stories like this because they make me realize over and over again that a common tendency to strictly separate our professional lives from our private lives just doesn't work...*

Yes, how you get to a place, who you meet there, and what you end up talking about is sometimes much more important than anything you may have planned to research. Both life and work are often a result of random events...

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## *Society and the Public Sphere*

### Strategies of Correction and Interrogation

**Janet Wolff**

*Originally, you were involved in sociology, and I would like to know how did you become interested in cultural and visual studies?*

My work in sociology has always dealt with cultural issues. I became involved in the sociology of culture when I was a Ph.D. student at the University of Birmingham in the late 1960s. Those were the early days of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, founded by Richard Hoggart and later directed by Stuart Hall. Although I was a graduate student in Sociology, I spent much of my time in seminars in the Centre. However, my move from sociology to the humanities has more to do with my move to the U.S.A. in the late 1980s. In the U.S.A., I found the discipline of sociology to be completely different to that in England and Europe. Especially in my own field of interest, sociology in Britain has been both more “humanistic” and more open to the interdisciplinary work than its equivalent in the U.S.A. In the early years of the development of cultural studies and the sociology of culture, it was quite usual for sociologists to work together (in conferences, journals, etc.) with people in film studies, literary theory, and other disciplines. Here in the U.S.A., though, given the highly professionalized nature of the academy, there is a far stronger divide between disciplines and - especially in this case - between the humanities and the social sciences. Sociology tends (though this is of course a broad generalization) to be more empirical, positivist, and often more quantitative than in Britain and Europe. It is more reserved about critical and theoretical approaches. Even though for the last twenty years American sociology has had an important sub-discipline, the sociology of culture, there is an inclination towards a certain positivism, as well as a strong resistance to addressing questions of representation and aesthetics. So when I moved to the U.S.A. at a time when certain humanities departments were

going in the direction of social and political analysis of culture, I was lucky enough to find a more welcoming home for my work in such departments.

*While the sociology of art was very important in the West, it rarely existed in the East, unless it was vulgarized and transformed according to a kind of Marxist-Leninist model. In the introduction to his book Image of the People (1973) Timothy J. Clark, one of the leading figures of the sociology of art in Britain, wrote that “when one writes the social history of art, it is easier to define what methods to avoid than propose a set of methods for systematic use.” What kind of methodology do you use in your work?*

T. J. Clark says that to understand art in its complexity, we need to talk not only about works of art, but also about ideologies, institutions, and patronage. I am not claiming that I have successfully managed to do this myself, but I believe this is an excellent framework for a critical examination of the relations between society and culture. For me, this is a kind of ideal model that can bring together sociological empiricism and visual analysis, and remain historical - something that American sociology of culture usually does not attempt. Of course, it is relatively easy to set out a methodological program; but it is much more difficult to put it into practice. If I were asked whether my work might be described as a “sociology of art”, my answer wouldn’t be that straightforward. My first book, *The Social Production of Art* (1981), fits very well into this category, because it reflects the “macro-perspective”, which sociology is traditionally so good at producing. Within last ten years, however, my perspective has changed somewhat and has become more focused on particular historical moments or texts, let’s say “micro” events. Although I am still inspired by “grand” theories of ideology and representation in culture and society, as formulated by people like Althusser or Gramsci, I think that like many other scholars in the late 1980s, I became quite dissatisfied with operating only with such abstractions. I realized that I didn’t just want to “theorize” art; I also wanted to understand it in its very specificity. Unlike T. J. Clark, I am not inclined (or, in fact, qualified) to take as my focus, say, one particular painting; rather, I try to consider a particular historical moment, event, or person, and examine this within a broader “web” of social, class, and artistic relations. And although in this kind of approach the work of art itself may appear to be secondary, it is never be subordinated to any sociological exploration of institutions and social relations. The real risk of sociology is reductionism.

*What impact has this approach informed by sociology had on your teaching?*

Most of my students today are either art historians or film theorists, and I suppose I feel that my “mission” is to encourage them to think about their disciplines,



or the works they write about, in a social, political or even ethnographic context. I believe that to analyze a painting or a film, one has to know a lot not only about technique, representation, and subject matter, but also about the institutional practices that surround the production and consumption of visual culture. The recent development of museology is a good example of the kind of approach I am talking about - a close examination of the role of a particular institution (its hierarchies, values, aesthetics, display practices) that throws a great deal of light on issues that might otherwise appear to be purely “aesthetic”.

*You said a moment ago that sociology runs the risk of being reductionist. I suppose that this rebuke could also be applied to the sociology of art as well. One of the feminist arguments against this kind of methodology is that it reduces issues of gender and sexuality to those of class. How do you as both a sociologist and a feminist deal with this kind of argument, and how do you resist conceiving art as a mere product of the society?*

Cultural studies and (to some extent) the sociology of culture came out of Marxism and speaking about “class” has very different connotations in England, in the U.S.A., and in Central and East Europe. For many of us in Western Europe, Marxism and neo-Marxism, have provided important and productive starting points for the analysis of the intersections between ideology, power, class, and culture. However, I’ve never found it as helpful on the question of gender. In the 1970s, there were a lot of discussions about the relationship between Marxism and feminism, in journals like *New Left Review*, *m/f*, and *Ideology & Consciousness*. Questions such as whether we are to examine patriarchy in terms of domestic labor, or whether women were the reserve army of labor, were discussed at length during that period, but in the end no “marriage” of Marxism and feminism was really produced. The problem is: how can we pay attention to both things at once without reducing class to gender, or vice versa. Yet, it is not always necessary to talk about class when we analyze a work of art, because sometimes it is simply not relevant to the issue. The same applies, of course, to problems of gender.

*Gender difference is closely related to other issues of otherness - especially sexuality or ethnicity, which have been discussed for a long time especially in the U.S.A. How and why did you begin to reflect on Jewish identity in your work, and, given your own Jewish background, how is it possible to avoid the seduction of self-victimization in such a situation?*

Initially, I was working on a couple of unconnected projects on Jewish identity in visual arts - for example, writing the text for an exhibition catalogue dealing with Jewish history. In the mid-1990s, I wrote an article on Mark Gertler, an English Jewish

artist who was associated with the Bloomsbury Group in the 1920s. I was interested in exploring links between the artist's biography, his ethnicity, and his particular place in the class structure of early twentieth-century Britain - and how all this might have played out in his art practice. This was the moment when Modernism appeared in England, and then, for the most part, disappeared rather quickly. Through this project, I got more interested in the history of Jews in England, and realized that in that culture and society the Jew was paradigmatically the "Other". This situation was manifest in many areas, including art criticism. In a more recent article, I have analyzed art-critical discourse in early twentieth-century England, with regard to the tendency to equate Jews with modernists, and to denigrate both.

As to my own "otherness", when I was growing up in England, to be Jewish was something one kept quiet about (In another essay of mine, about the contemporary artist R. B. Kitaj, I have suggested that his "American" way of being more vocal about his Jewish identity in England may have played a role in the critics' hostile reception of his 1994 retrospective at the Tate Gallery in London.) I am very aware of, and wary of, the victimization complex which has been so visible in recent years in American culture and society. I am especially critical of the tendency to appropriate the Holocaust rhetorically and politically in contemporary life, and of the gratuitous invocation of such "victim" identity - which is not to say, of course, that there are not many impressive and successful art works and texts which address the Holocaust and other aspects of Jewish life and history. Avoiding essentialism whether as a Jew or as a woman, has never been a simple process for me, but there are ways in which one can do it. Stressing the provisionality and the constructedness of any identity is one of them.

*Art history and criticism has been written for a very long time from an impersonal, disembodied perspective as a means by which its findings and interpretations could be conceived as universal and generally valid. The self of the writer was hidden behind the neutral voice of the "truth-teller". You always seem to invest your own subjectivity and identity into your work, which leads me to ask what is the function of "I" in this kind of writing?*

I think that even in the most "objective" and detached kind of writing, the "self" is in some way visible or detectable. It's now commonplace to insist on objectivity as a myth - and to stress the impossibility of "the view from nowhere". Art history, and history in general, might still be presented as transcending the interests of any individual, and thus achieving a kind of "objectivity", but we should always remind ourselves that this fact is a fiction. Writing about a certain kind of art, or being focused on a specific artist, is always a question of selection. Whether this selection is motivated by personal preferences, or by collectively shared ideologies, it is never objective. If we consider that the so-called universal voice has generally been male,

then it should come as no surprise that it was listening to women's voices that helped to dismantle the notion of historical objectivity. So the fact that in my recent work I am perhaps more explicit about my own relationship to my subject is really just an aspect of this more general recognition of the groundedness of any research.

*In my country, feminism and gender studies are still far from being fully acknowledged in academic disciplines, but the situation is quite different in other parts of the world. As you pointed out in your 1995 essay "The artist, the critic and the academic feminism's problematic relationship with 'Theory'", there is a danger that feminism itself will suffer from academicization in the States. How can feminism withstand the temptations of institutional power? In other words, how can feminism become a respected part of any academic discourse without being co-opted by the mainstream?*

The easy answer, especially in the 1970s, used to be that you resist such co-optation as long as you stay involved in women's movement, which meant in activist politics. However, this answer is not always appropriate, and the situation in both academia and politics has also changed enormously in the last two decades. A related question about the risk of co-optation is whether to teach separate women's and gender studies courses, or whether it is not more effective and more valuable to incorporate feminism into other courses and disciplines. The arguments are, on the one hand, against the "dilution" of feminism, and, on the other hand, against "ghettoization". I personally believe that we still need both. That is, the more gender questions are addressed within other, more traditional fields, the more likely is the essential transformation of those fields. Yet the specialized courses on gender studies, feminism, or queer theory are still extremely important, providing the space and the opportunity for serious work in these areas.

You mention the suspicion with which feminism is perceived in your country - I have noticed that myself while visiting Central and East Europe, or working with scholars from this part of the world in the U.S.A. It's worth saying, however, that the term "feminism" is not unproblematic in the U.S.A. these days either. Many feminist professors report that undergraduates resist using this term; they may say such things as "I'm not a feminist but...", which of course doesn't mean that they are not what we might understand as being a feminist. On the other hand, it is true that denying the word itself includes a risk of co-option, and of losing what has been accomplished by and for women in the feminist movement. I believe that this tendency is connected with too much talk about post-feminism, which might be claiming that feminism has succeeded, but risks now a certain complacency and a dismissive attitude towards feminism and its political goals.

*Yet isn't it paradoxical that major American art institutions still only contain less than 5% of women artists in their collections and exhibitions? Even though*

*museum and curatorial strategies have changed especially after the arrival of postmodernism, they seem to have had very little impact on gender politics in museums and galleries. In addition to your academic work, you have also had a chance to collaborate as a curator with some museums, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art. What do you have to say about this situation?*

It cannot be denied that the influence of critical theory has brought about some changes in museum practices, including in the permanent displays of collections. The narrow, linear narrative of art history, which was traditionally presented (through Great Art and Great Artists), has been challenged in many of the major American museums. But you are absolutely right that this challenge has been very limited in terms of introducing women and other marginalized subjects into its discourses. I think that this has a lot to do with the continuing power of boards of trustees, as well as with the persistence of traditional and conservative art-critical and curatorial ideologies. Unfortunately, there is a limit to the ability of forward-thinking curators to effect a radical transformation in museums.

You mention my interest in the Whitney Museum of American Art, but even here an exhibition that I was invited to propose a few years ago in the end did not materialize. I was interested in the work of women artists in the circle around Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (the Whitney Studio Club) in the two decades leading up to the founding of the museum in 1931. These were artists who were very successful and visible in their time, but who are little known now. My idea was to present a small exhibition of their work, to allow people both to become familiar with it, and perhaps to address the question of why they had dropped from view since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, the Whitney curator (with, I must admit, my own collusion) felt the work was not “good enough” to show. It was only later that I began to wonder what such an aesthetic judgement meant, and to link this to a wider realization of the various ways in which, since the 1950s and since the success of abstract art of the New York School, realism and figurative art have been both denigrated and, at the same time, “feminized”.

*One of the chapters of Carol Duncan’s wonderful book *Civilizing Rituals is symptomatically entitled “The Modern Art Museum: It’s a Man’s World.” How can we make the museum into a woman’s world as well?**

To have more women artists in the museums is certainly very important, but to make the museum environment more women-friendly, or gender-conscious, goes far beyond that. The solution is not about having more women working in the museum structures, because there have always been important women involved in the major American art museums – for example Abby Rockefeller and Lillie Bliss in the founding of MoMA, or Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, founder of the Whitney Museum of

American Art. Counting women artists or analyzing the representation of gender in visual images was significant to the 1970s feminist project, but I believe that a crucial task for contemporary feminists is to examine how the culture itself is gendered.

In the Whitney project I mentioned a moment ago, I was looking at the ways in which women artists were marginalized by the hegemonic narrative of Modernism in the period after the Second World War. In my opinion, they were marginalized not because they were women, but because certain styles or genres, and notably Realism, were themselves perceived as “feminine”. The women artists of my study, in the 1920s and 1930s, happened to be Realists, and as a result their work (together with that of their male colleagues) has been considered second-rate in the past fifty years. In other words, the gender question isn’t just about men/women, but also about how gender operates discursively and more broadly in culture.

As art historians, curators, and cultural critics, we still have to do the important empirical work of looking for women artists in history, and describing and analyzing their work. This still connects us to the 1970s legacy but we also should look at questions about gender made more visible and more central by new theories and by our changed circumstances. The answer to the male domination of the museums is not to get rid of all early twentieth century Modernist paintings of female nudes – they are wonderful works of art after all. Instead, we should try to figure out new and critical display strategies based, for instance, on juxtapositions which would dismantle the concept of the woman as a passive object of the gaze. Raising a challenging question doesn’t have to abolish a pleasure of looking.

*Let me go back to your 1995 essay in which you raised the question why feminism has an ambivalent relationship to theory. Even though you argued that theory has traditionally been seen as a “male” agenda, you emphasized the importance of theory for feminism. Could you explain your advocacy of theory, which is often conceived as the opposite of political engagement?*

In this essay, I reacted to the supposed opposition within 1980s feminism. This opposition, which was often seen as a conflict between American and British feminism, or, sometimes, between French-influenced and Anglo-Saxon feminism, was a very artificial problem in my opinion. In relation to a number of feminist critiques of theory, I wanted to show that theory is not necessarily apolitical, elitist, or remote from the practical concerns of feminism. I argued that theoretical interventions could be socially, culturally, but also politically very effective. If artists like Mary Kelly were accused of being elitist, because their work is informed by and dependent on rather difficult theoretical approaches, I stressed (and of course I have not been alone in making this point) that, first, complex issues require complex and subtle analysis, and, second, that not every art work or every exhibition needs to

make a populist appeal. I don't think that the theoretical remoteness of academic feminism is necessarily a problem, because for me feminism is an interplay between various discourses and practices, and any limitation deprives it of its richness and complexity. Unless theory is used for its own sake, it should not be a barrier for feminism. Moreover, theory is politically central to many feminist practices.

*Even though you are critical of feminist essentialism, one of your books is titled Feminine Sentences (1990). This title seem to suggest that there are some specific feminine aesthetics, which would seem to contradict your rejection of biological determinism of gender. Do you believe that there is a specificity of male as opposed to female culture?*

I don't believe in a specifically feminine aesthetic. However, as my work on the women at the Whitney suggests, I do think we have "historically constructed" concepts of "the feminine". As many feminists have shown, "femininity" and "the feminine", used in an entirely non-essentialist ways, continue to be important in at least two senses: as an acknowledgment of particular social-historical constructions of gender (applied positively or negatively), and as a focus of identification and mobilization for feminists. As we can see in the work of many women artists, "femininity" can be an extremely effective tool for deconstructing social and cultural biases behind the term itself. An excellent book on this subject is Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*. On the other hand, one has to be very careful about feminist aesthetic strategies. Such strategies are intent on challenging the supposed universalism of male culture; they cannot in the process risk presenting themselves as counter-universals. As soon as we start defining feminist art strategies in terms of particular style, form, or theme, we lose the critical stance that is necessary to this project.

*Issues relevant to both feminism and modernism have been important to a number of remarkable thinkers, including yourself, for, at least, the last two decades. While some argue that the concept of modernism is inherently masculine because it is based on men's experiences (Griselda Pollock) or technology (Alice Jardine), other writers take an opposing standpoint emphasizing that modernism itself can be seen as a product of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century feminism (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar). Besides these two perspectives, there are even voices that point out that the male anxiety of technology and mass-consumption in modern period is a reflection of the threat of women (Andreas Huyssen). I personally don't feel very comfortable with defining the gender of any époque, or style, because it implies thinking in dichotomies. And yet I am very curious how would you answer the question: what is the gender of Modernism?*

I have been interested in this question for a long time, and my conclusion at the moment is that the gender of Modernism is masculine. Of course, this is far from

being an “essentialist” statement - or, for that matter, an absolute one. (As we know there were many important female modernist artists.) I mean rather that the gender of Modernism has been produced discursively, and in particular retrospectively, from the second half of the twentieth century. As I said before, I think it is a question of how history is written rather than a question of the objective characteristics of works of art. Modernism is a very complex phenomenon, particularly in relation to questions of gender. For example, we know that for some people the figure of the modernist artist in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was clearly feminized. And yet, within both the art world and the discourse of art, the modern/modernist (male) artist appears as a masculine (often macho) hero. Related to the discourse of modernism, the theory of “modernity” focuses on the *flâneur* - the urban stroller, traditionally taken to be one of the key figures of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modern life. The *flâneur*, though, is necessarily male, because women couldn't wander at leisure on the streets. As a result, the discourse of modernity also privileges men and the experience of men. However, as Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out, this too is more complicated, since from certain points of view the *flâneur* does not fit the prototype of the “ideal” male: he doesn't have a job and is not economically productive. In other words, the question of gender ideology in the modern period is rather complicated. The conclusion could be that the gender of modernism simply changes as perceived in different historical moments and from different points of view. Also, gender is only one of the ways to think about modernism but there are many others. Similarly, one could ask what class is modernism, which would be very interesting, especially if we consider the part of both democratization and the class struggle in modern society. Considering the role of the ethnic “Other” could also provoke a lot of remarkable issues about the character of modernism...

*...or even the sexual “Other”, just look at Baudelaire's note that “the lesbian is the heroine of modernism.”*

The women who appear in Baudelaire, and then are taken up by Walter Benjamin, are the so-called marginal women: the widow, the lesbian and the prostitute. Even though it is tempting to interpret their visibility as a kind of proto-feminist agenda, I am afraid that rather than favoring women, such interpretation reflects certain male fantasies.

*Besides, Benjamin Georg Simmel appears very often in your writing on Modernism. Why are these two authors with their significant insights into social, or even sociological dimensions of culture important for you?*

One reason is that they both have an appealing essayist style, something which, I think, is coming back into favor in cultural theory these days. In addition, they also

have in common an approach that David Frisby has called “sociological impressionism”. For some contemporary writers, this fits very well with postmodern textual strategies - though this is not my own interest in the work. For me the essayist strategies of Benjamin and Simmel are both a logical continuation of my shift from the general and the abstract to the concrete and the particular, and an enticement to explore the possibility of a more “literary” sociology.

Of course, my interest in Benjamin is not exactly unusual! In the 1980s and 1990s his work became quite central to cultural studies and literary theory. I think that, apart from the appeal of a fascinating biography, this has a lot to do with his particular style of writing. He combines criticism with personal observations, and thus offers the possibility of micrological analysis which is at the same time materialist and structural. At the same time, the autobiographical aspects of his work - also, I think, a reason for his appeal to cultural theorists today - avoid the excess of some of the more self-indulgent examples in feminist work and literary studies. As Benjamin’s work shows, situating the “self” into a specific historical moment can be very challenging. In the case of Simmel, it is not so much the autobiographical, but the sense for the concrete, for a simple detail, upon which a complex discourse is based, which I find so fascinating and productive for doing cultural and social history.

*The less academically authoritative, and more essayist voice, you just pointed out by Benjamin, is not only a question of style, but it could be used as a methodological tool too. Some feminist scholars argue against the use of any methodology, because they see it as diminishing the power of feminism to disturb our prior assumptions, from which grow most stereotypes, including those about women. We already touched upon the issue of methodology, but I wonder if you have ever shared this distrust towards the use of any pre-existing methodology?*

No, on the contrary. I am much more suspicious of a refusal of methodology, which seems to me to give up the responsibility to analyze the structures of power and inequality. Theories and methodologies must always, of course, be employed critically, with a clear awareness of their provisionality (and of the perspectives they necessarily incorporate - rendering certain things highly visible, and others invisible). But this is not at all the same as to say that we can do without theories and methodologies.

*In your work, one can trace two different concepts of the feminist project. While you call the first one a “politics of correction,” for the second one you suggest a term “politics of interrogation”. Could you explain the difference between the two, and how can we use these concepts for revising history, and, more particularly, modern culture, which is one of the central topics for you?*



This brings us back to your question about feminist aesthetics, mainly the notion of “femininity,” which is usually used to denigrate what it describes. In my 1999 essay ‘The Feminine in Modern Art’, I look at the concept of the feminine differently, as that which has been excluded in the masculinization of culture. If it is true that modernism has been discursively gendered male, the question is ‘What is it excluded?’ Asking this question has directed feminists to investigate a number of things, in particular strategies of representation and the relatively invisible women artists of the period. This is what I mean by the “politics of correction” - dismantling the one-sidedness of historical and other narratives. In contrast, the “politics of interrogation” explores the very process of gender construction. How do we look at paintings, either by men or by women, and what does it mean to gender them masculine or feminine? How, and with what intention do we use these gendered terms, while describing particular works of art? In this way, too, we can consider a particular painting, or a particular moment, to decipher the strains and contradictions in its supposed “masculinity” or “femininity”.

*When we talked about museum strategies, you said that to simply include women artists into exhibitions or permanent collections is not the solution, because it doesn't revise the very system, which has excluded them. This makes me think that it is similarly problematic to deal with the “excavated” women artists as if they were “great mistresses,” to use the title from Griselda Pollock's and Roszika Parker's book, because the concept of the artistic genius is undoubtedly male. For the same reason, some feminist art historians have rejected even the whole genre of artistic monographs, because they considered this form as incorporating the glorification of greatness, which was traditionally a male business. How can we use a “politics of correction” and avoid simply inserting women into the existing patriarchal structures?*

So far, I have not dared to take on the challenge of trying to do anything like a monograph, not even the size of a mini-essay. Nevertheless, I disagree with other scholars who claim that the days of monographs are over. I believe that there are analytic and critically situated ways of writing a monograph, whether of a male or of a female artist, which could transform the traditional biographical writing into a dynamic, challenging, and, most importantly, intersubjective genre. Very recently, I have begun working on a very interesting woman artist, Kathleen McEnery. After studying in New York (and having two paintings included in the famous 1913 Armory Show, which introduced European modernism to the U.S.A.), she married and moved to Rochester, New York. She continued to paint for many years, and I have had the opportunity to see many of her works, in private and public collections - for example, the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington D.C. has two of her paintings. So I will have to see what kind of book I can write about her - whether,

indeed, the “modified monograph” turns out to be a possibility for me, and in what way it will be interesting and productive to employ feminist and cultural theory in the context of the study of a not much known woman artist undertaken now, nearly thirty years after Linda Nochlin’s publisher her ground-breaking essay “Why There Have Been No Great Women Artists?”.

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## *Society and the Public Sphere*

### Subverting the Myths of Everyday Life

**Martha Rosler**

*For the last thirty years, you have been working in video, performance, photography, critical writing, and theory. In all these areas you have been redefining the traditional categories of art and dismantling the modernist paradigm of pure visuality. What were the major impulses that started this interdisciplinary and highly critical process in your work, and who has made the biggest impact on your decision to ‘interrupt the normal anticipation of the beauty value of art’, as you put it in 1983?*

Rather than start with who has influenced my interest in “category smashing”, so to speak, the question is what was the context. For me, the context was the 1960s with its shattering of several artistic and art historical paradigms, the reaction against the stranglehold of Clement Greenberg as a single autocratic critic who promoted Abstract Expressionism in the States and determined for a long time what was acceptable in art and what was not, and, most importantly, the social movements of this period. In addition, pop art offered a tantalizing model of art that refused to see itself as a mystical and transcendental projection, and, instead, promoted a possibility to engage art with the social in an incredibly potent way. Of course, pop art drew back from this engagement in many ways, but it still offered a great chance of taking the social ‘landscape’ as the subject rather than some Hegelian ‘negation of the negation’ kind of idea that was such a powerful Modernist model beforehand. This model was almost a theological idea of what art is to be to be accepted as art, and this true art was to be free of any social or even temporal distractions. In contrast, what the social movements of the 1960s meant for my generation was that we needed to plunge into more complex ideas, including ideas of what art is. Feeling all the strict boundaries and gates being suddenly knocked down in a social arena and philosophy made us question how art practice could survive in its normative compactness.

*In your recent interview with Benjamin Buchloh, you claimed that ‘as viewers of Godard, we wanted to parasitize all forms, and foreground the apparatus. As readers of Brecht, we wanted to use... theatrical or dramatized sequences or performance elements together with more traditional documentary strategies, (and) to use text, irony, absurdity, mixed forms of all types.’ Was your experience with this revolutionary and culturally rich period one of the reasons that you became active as a writer and critic? Or, to put it differently, was making art all of a sudden too ‘small’ for you?*

Absolutely. I was writing already when I was a ten- or a twelve-year-old girl, but for a long time any notion of interdisciplinary work was unthinkable for me because we were taught that one has to choose just one profession. I started to write together with Allan Sekula while studying at the University of California in San Diego in the early 1970s. I was a member of a group of people including Fred Lonidier and Phil Steinmetz, who were junior faculty, and Allan Sekula and Brian Connell who were students there; we used to meet and talk about art - especially video, film, and photography. Subsequently, a number of younger women artists who worked in video, such as Adele Sholes and Marge Dean, joined us in these discursive practices. The very reason that, specifically, Allan and I started writing - about our art practice, and about art in general - was that nobody else was writing about the things we considered important. It was especially photography that we found extremely engaging for our interventions into the social sphere. Since nobody else seemed to bother back then, we decided to write about the re-conceptualization of photography. Even before I moved to San Diego, a primary influence in expanding my work into critical writing was David Antin, whom I met when he and his wife Eleanor were still in New York City, before they moved to California. Eleanor Antin had an important impact on my art; her ironic challenge of social and cultural absurdities was wonderful and very instructive.

*The beginning of your artistic work historically coincides with the beginning of the feminist movement in the U.S.A. You already mentioned Eleanor Antin, but there were other women artists joining the movement whose work was very different, such as Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke or Mary Kelly. When and under what circumstances did you get involved in feminism?*

I was a political person before I was a feminist. In 1967, in the earliest moments of the women’s movement, my baby was born, and I was still wondering about feminism and its potential for organizational efforts for women. It was clear to me how black people could organize effectively because they rarely lived with whites, but women lived with men. How could they be mobilized? Thus the idea of ‘war between the sexes’ that I grew up with was puzzling to me for a long time. It took me

a while to realize that feminism provides the possibility of talking about social injustice in a way that was directly about “me” and my “own” life and not about some abstract entity or principle that structured society. And yet, the changes feminism wanted to achieve were not founded on a purely individual basis but on drawing strength from the community of other people in public but also in very intimate situations, such as talking as we are now. The individual problems women had and for which they as individuals were blamed - neuroticism, dissatisfaction, or hysteria (apparently, all this was based on a Freudian model) - could all of a sudden be openly discussed among groups of women. In the 1960s and 1970s this began to be called ‘consciousness raising,’ and even though it might sound a bit didactic now, that was a moment in which we realized that most of the so-called ‘women’s problems’ result from the distribution of social power, within the family and in society at large. So feminism was fascinating to me not only because of the possibility to rethink the relations between sexes in a totally new way, but also because it demanded a redefinition of “all” power relations. ‘Where does the power reside?’ was a question I have been asking ever since. As a person interested in Eastern Europe and post-Soviet style regimes, I have been questioning for a while how these power mechanisms work in places where the ideas of feminism are refracted by experiences in which women are oppressed by *pro forma* equality - which, apparently, is not the same as real equality.

*Even in my country, any suggestion of feminism was refracted during the socialist period. The official ideology conceived feminism as a bourgeois relic, and, at the same time, the totalitarian regime existed as a “genderless” enemy for both women and men. However, it has already been more than a decade since the democratic changes in Eastern Europe began, but the genderless citizenship still governs in Czech society, even though such genderlessness is evidently a male domain. Women’s equal rights continue to be an illusion, something that I call a ‘false sense of women’s emancipation’ that the Communist ideology quite skillfully managed to convince people was a reality.*

*Yet, the socialist “emancipationist” tendencies in Eastern Europe could be traced back to the avant-garde movements in the first half of the twentieth century and they promoted the liberation of women’s position in modern society as strongly as the merging of art into life. In 1979, you declared yourself that you wanted to make ‘art about life.’ How do you relate your work to early avant-garde art practices?*

My attitude towards them is that they were brilliant and even fun at the time, but they are the practices not only of a different era but also of countries very different from the U. S. A. At the same time, I have a deep suspicion about how these movements have been represented, because the discipline of art history has reified and fetishized them as absolute and unquestionable concepts. For me, the importance of those

movements lay in the fact that they involved process and social intervention. Even though it is difficult for me to understand fully the nuances of those avant-gardes, I still admire its disruptive, subversive, and rowdy elements. I think that my generation has unwittingly repeated the avant-garde strategies some thirty or forty years later. It would be perhaps well taken to note that the historical avant-gardes “failed”, as people from Peter Bürger to Suzi Gablik have put it, meaning that they didn’t succeed in transforming society. Certainly, that’s an interesting thing to proclaim as a goal, but one can hardly truly expect art to bring about social revolution.

To think for instance of Dada only in terms of nonsensical fun is undoubtedly entertaining, but we should understand why and how fun becomes political. The “second avant-garde” of the 1960s, such as the Situationists, was in many ways different from the inter-war cultural movement - but the idea of disruption to make visible the boundaries of life experience remains an ongoing necessity, and I believe that if art is to be innovative and challenging, it should always embody a disruptive element as well.

*Political themes can be found in your work since its very beginnings. The Vietnam war, women political prisoners, the Cold War, the exploitation of Mexican women working as domestic workers in Southern California, new forms of colonization, globalization and its impact on local cultures, homelessness and poverty, vicious political repression in Chile, or mass-media disinformation have all been important topics in your work. As you know I am coming from a country where the relationship between art and politics is usually seen as a backlash of socialist ideology, and the so-called political art is understood almost exclusively in terms of propaganda. How do art and politics come together without either didactically politicizing aesthetics, or aestheticizing politics? Can any artist escape from political responsibility while being a citizen as well?*

This question is closely linked to Walter Benjamin’s theory as set forth in his famous essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,’ in which he argues that fascism aestheticizes politics producing the most seductive and dangerous form of propaganda. This model also certainly works in a similar way within Communist totalitarian regimes, but however obvious this example is, because its background was a violation of human rights, I am nevertheless convinced the two sides of the “iron curtain” were mirror images. The Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, has admitted to vigorously using abstract art during the Cold War to symbolize the U.S.A.’s political freedom. Thus, abstractness and expressive painterly gestures were considered as the polar opposite of narrative, figurative, and didactic socialist realism; in fact, both of these concepts were “avant-garde” and conservative at the same time, depending on the socio-political context. Using what is now despised as didacticism, I and a number of other American artists in the late 1960s wanted

not only to provoke (even though it was a big part of our intention), but also to multiply artistic and curatorial strategies to address burning social and political issues. Similarly, while “collectivism” was a dirty word for the artists in the East, we were using collaborative and anonymous interventions to dismantle exactly that notion of the authored work as an expression of an artistic genius that was promoted by American cultural politics.

As I am personally interested in “flickering” rather than static strategies of art production, my work is also based on a dialectic between move and countermove. If “my” art world makes some move, I feel provoked to react to it - whether it is a subversive or an agreeable reaction - but in any case I hope that my response is always a challenging countermove. Even though I believe deeply in politically engaged art, we have to distinguish between “bad” and “good” political art strategies. A truly political art is not simply propaganda but an art that contains a permanent challenge to both the outside world and oneself.

*In 1989, you organized a big project ‘If You Lived Here...,’ which explored issues of city community, housing, homelessness, and urban planning. In the publication that accompanied the project, you wrote that ‘the city is a site of production of productive signification,’ and also that the ‘percent for art’ is based on beautification maintaining profit in the private sector rather than on critical practices which would explore the ‘production of space’. This project is still very remarkable, especially when we consider that homeless people in New York - and more than half of them are children - recently started to be criminalized by the city’s mayor for having nowhere to stay except the streets. How is the space we live in produced, and what is the difference between public art and art works in public spaces? What can an artist or a curator do for homeless people in the city, and other burning problems in contemporary society?*

It is very sad that in our craze for quick and easy solutions, we turn to the authoritarian Father figure who punishes his children, and these days in New York, that’s exactly the case, not only with respect to homeless people but to all poor people. I have been dwelling on these issues as an artist and a curator for so long because I was always intrigued by ideological power and wanted to excavate its very mechanisms. Capitalism’s current phase is redefining the world territory and producing certain kinds of abstract space that are linked to information flow. Those who are lowest down in that “new world order”, and who cannot find an actual physical space for their body, are treated like garbage. What can artists do when they are deeply bothered by situations like these? Artists can try to dispel stereotypical “specters” that inhabit our societies, occupy our minds, and support other people’s suffering. Artists can remove the elements of myth-making from potent images that are signifiers manipulated by political figures, and ruling

ideologies, and integrate them into the larger context of social life. A crucial aspect of my 1989 project - even though it took place in a gallery - was interaction with the general public. Communication with people across genders, classes, ethnic groups, and generations is a necessary element of public art as a relatively new “genre” of visual art, and we shouldn’t shrink from speaking about its educational dimensions. Education needn’t be the same as either propaganda or didacticism; on the contrary it should provoke questions and provide space for diverse answers and reactions. And that’s very similar to how art could operate in public spaces. What artists can do instead of maintaining the system in which they produce their work is to stand in a different social location and call attention to problematic things in all spheres of our lives - public or private, intimate or political. If artists are people of conscience, how could they avoid reacting to problems in the society? It might be different in other countries, but most artists in the States live in neighborhoods where you are more likely to see social “Others” more than an ideal image of ‘American beauty.’ Start from there! Of course, art itself doesn’t create social transformation, but it points toward problems and possible solutions, and artists’ engagement in political activities also help to produce political change.

*It is interesting to hear you - and many other American artists - shamelessly using words that are still largely taboo in art discourse in Eastern Europe, such as feminism, political activism, or collectivism. These concepts are important for all art disciplines, but they play a special role in public art. It is clear that truly socially responsive (and responsible) public art is different from the common urban aesthetics which sticks with formal clichés of High Modernism, and yet we cannot deny that the social character of public art often runs a risk of didacticism - that it will turn into an illustration of some social thesis that shuts down all the artistic potential. Moreover, there is a very unclear boundary between interventions into the public sphere by artists and by skilled designers who work for social organizations. Just look at two current social campaigns in New York subway: Barbara Kruger’s poster based on a black and white photography of a group of anonymous men with thick red lines of text that reads: ‘77% of antiabortion activists are men, 100% of them will never be pregnant;’ the second one is a series of photographic portraits of battered women that provides the female victims of domestic violence a number to call. Both of these social “ads” are very effective, they are everywhere, and they could be easily taken as public art by a mistake. Even though Kruger is a well-known artist, in this case her work remains anonymous. What can you say about this issue?*

Unlike public artists, I find those “skilled designers” to be making just another form of advertisement, no matter how vital are the issues they deal with. The two cases you just pointed out offer a good basis for developing my argument a bit further. I admire Kruger’s poster - a very simple but poignant image that is striking and



politically arousing just because it is so straight-forward. But the battered-woman campaign tells us the whole story - it is a narrative that makes us weep, just like any Hollywood movie. Kruger's epigrammatic poster yells at you like a megaphone without accusing you or manipulating your emotions. With an effective visual language, it provides you with facts about patriarchal society, while the second poster series exploits the general population's sentimentality and wants you to feel sorry for those poor women. In reality, however, we like this poster because it makes us feel good about ourselves - about our generous sensitivity and our understanding of all these women's suffering - but I don't see what the political potential of an image like this is. Knowing about this campaign more than most people, what bothers me most is that the whole thing is a fake. The beaten women are just models, and their racial and class diversity is a trick to manipulate people's identification. (I hope it has some effect, though, in reminding the real battered women that there is an agency they can call for help.)

*I might have been naive, but I had no doubt about their authenticity...*

That's not naive, it's totally human, and the "skilled designers" always work with this presumption. But exploitation is not related only to false victims. It is the whole dilemma of documentary - if you picture the actual victims you may be 'revictimizing' them. Victimization is part of American life; the endless photographic or filmic reproduction of victimization, which is one of the biggest problems of these media, makes you feel sorry - about other people, or about yourself. It makes you voyeuristically or narcissistically implicated in degradation, but it doesn't make you act. In any case, to answer your question, I think that even though public art is sometimes very close to 'social advertisement,' especially when it uses photographic imagery and text, its aim should be to arouse your consciousness, instead of assuring you of what you already know and what you want to hear, or see, or feel. Saying this, I must emphasize, once again, that I deeply believe in the political meaning of art. As both an artist and a citizen, I have always been seriously frightened about the death of the public sphere as a freely accessible site where anybody and everybody can exchange ideas about the political dimension of life. Its potential absence worries me here in the West, but it was a real threat in former Eastern Bloc countries, where there was only a fake public sphere and no civil society for a long time. Since the public sphere existed only on a formal level in these countries, and the very term 'public' was only an empty sign - which I know from my own experiences in that part of the world - all kinds of public engagement, including the public art, are very important there now.

*The two social campaigns we just discussed disclose issues that are usually kept behind a closed door. Since the 1960s, you realized a number of projects in which an*

*encounter of the intimate/domestic/private and the public/political took place: Greetings (1965); Bringing the War Home (1967-72); Diaper Pattern (1975); Kitchen Economics (1977), and others. On one hand you “contaminate” the political and public spheres by inappropriate, disobedient, and uncontrollable femininity. On the other hand, you allow the masculine arrogance and aggressions to enter the secure domestic environment. In 1977 you defined feminism as engagement in ‘a principled criticism of economics and social power relations and... (in) collective action.’ Where are the frontiers between the public and the private, or are there any? And, also, how do you relate activism to feminist art?*

There are a few different ways how to bring the private into the public sphere, and we certainly don't have to think about the “private” as something related merely to domesticity or sexuality. There are many issues that are inherently part of the public discourse, but since they are well hidden, or “privatized” in a way, they are not visible, and their meaning is diminished, or ridiculed. Seen from this perspective, questions of both the boundaries between the public and the private and their permeability are much more complex. The feminist art activism of Guerrilla Girls is exemplary for manifesting the complexity and ambiguity of this issue. Without calling attention to themselves as individuals, Guerrilla Girls offer a critical discourse, which - enriched by the power of their humor and laughter - has turned out to be a very effective form of criticism of the continuing patriarchal practices of the art world. Of course, it is propaganda that, on the surface, is full of statistics, but since it involves a lot of laughter, irony, amusement, and silliness it has a capability to challenge its own bias as well. Similarly to Kruger, Guerrilla Girls confront people with facts. On the other hand, this group - and I honestly don't know its members' identities - takes advantage of being anonymous and of not taking responsibility. They criticize but they don't tell you who they are, and their “unmasked” artistic careers thus cannot be harmed by their activism. I love what they do, but it would be hypocritical not to see its shadowy side.

Another route of women artists' activism is to stick with the subjects of power relationship and keep them in the foreground - whether it is a work on “abjection” by Kiki Smith or the potent rhetorical work by Jenny Holzer or any other form that questions gender and sexual stereotypes. This might not be activism in the traditional sense of street demonstrations or riots, but it is as important. Whether we are women or men, problematizing the signifiers in everyday life should remain near the heart of our efforts.

*However, many contemporary young women artists in the States become increasingly disinterested in feminism.*

This lack of interest, which comes and goes, reflects a feeling that there is no

discrimination against women artists, which is a fiction. The position of women artists has improved enormously over the past thirty years, at least in this country, but abandoning feminist strategies would be both preliminary and dangerous. Echoing the sentiments of a number of people, a friend of mine - a feminist video-maker - noted recently 'the 1990s equals the 1970s lite', meaning that the art of the 1990s could be seen as a reprise of the artistic approach of the 1970s but without politics. In many ways, it is true. Rejecting the label "feminism" is a strategy for getting into the art world without being dismissed as a potential disturbance. I am afraid that a loss of the collective consciousness that was so powerful among women artists would only reinforce what we intended to subvert: the gender particularity and godly quality of artistic genius. While I invoke the collective, I certainly am not attacking individual imagination. I think that in totalitarian regimes, where official propaganda implied that the interior life is nothing, the notion of genius was necessary and useful. However, the notion of the power of individual imagination should never be taken as the opposite of personally and collectively produced social critique, in all its myriad forms, explicit and wildly oblique.

*Feminist art, art history, and also film studies significantly call into question the visual representation of women and femininity, and usually argue against the objectification of women by male artistic subjects. A critique of the "Barbie imperative", so to speak, was an important part of your early work, in which you examined male voyeurism and patriarchal control over the female body. In 1972, for instance, you made a large collage out of female Playboy sex idols. A year later, you put together a performance, Vital Statistics of a Citizen, in which an undressing woman is measured by men in medical uniforms and judged by women in similar clothing. There were a few other pieces dealing with this issue that followed in the 1970s, but - unlike many other women artists - then you stopped dealing with this problem. Why?*

In the 1970s, I did two large photomontage series - one of them dealt with the Vietnam War, and the other - which began earlier - with the representation of women. Most of my performances and videotapes from that period were, one way or the other, related to women as well. But I started to wonder how many more "naked ladies" am I going to cut out of magazines and paste onto paper? Seeing the never-ending exploitation of women's bodies I still consider this problem extremely important, but it simply got played out in my own work. Even though my attention moved to issues of gentrification and urban spaces, the body has never vanished from my own work. For the feminist movement, "space" was understood in terms of social relations, and the "physical" disciplines of architecture, urbanism and geography, were only incidental to questions of "social" space. I realized there was immense power encoded into the actual production of space, which controls our

ways of thinking as well as our bodies. I was fascinated by Lefebvre's theory of production of space and disturbed by how space, which is usually conceived in more or less abstract dimensions, is dominated by the distribution and allocation of food, natural resources, pleasure, or entertainment.

*What do you think about a revisionist tendency among some feminist scholars who tend to question the rigidity and one-sidedness of reading voyeurism and male visual representation of women as purely objectifying? Some argue that women like to be seen but the question is how - or, to put it differently, that images of women return their look back. Kaja Silverman, for instance, argued during our recent interview in a Heideggerian way that to be seen means to exist.*

There is no question that women have suffered from the problem of invisibility, but this is a vicious circle. Women have been allowed to be visible only as objects, which gave them at least a limited pleasure to exist in this world. Moreover, as many feminist film theorists have pointed out, filmic sexual idols often motivated other women to feel potent and powerful themselves because they identified with these idols. However, to exist as an object is an iconic state of being - as an object, you cannot freely move. You are an image without any actual agency, and I wouldn't make a radical difference between static means, such as painting or photography, on the one hand, and moving ones, such as film. Also, there should be a symmetry here, because even men like to be seen, but they have always had a privilege to "act" in real lives as well.

*The shift from the critique of representation of female sexuality towards the issues of space didn't happen that suddenly in your work, as it might seem on first sight. You did several remarkable pieces related to food, eating, cooking, starving, or anorexia. I see them as a logical link between the body and the social space.*

That's absolutely right. Already the performance and then videotape *Vital Statistics of a Citizen* invokes the social right in the title. *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) is one of the first video-pieces I did, and it was followed by other food- or domesticity-oriented pieces. In 1974-75, I did three postcard novels about food. In the first one, the heroine is a bourgeois housewife who can't dream beyond her very privatized life, because she doesn't know any larger world than her domesticity and tourism. She is an accomplished hostess and wonderful cook, just as her husband wants her to be, experimenting with exotic recipes. This piece was about the channeling of female creativity into an ephemeral form that encodes nurture, consumerism, and a certain kind of American imperialist appropriation of other cultures - in this case through cuisine. In the second novel, a working-class woman who is a vegetarian starts as a hamburger waitress dreaming of bettering the food,

and ends up with a plan to make a social revolution from a hamburger stand. The third one, written in Spanish, was about a Mexican maid. I wanted to show that cooking food, as any kind of other creative activity, is situated in a particular social environment.

*It's also ironic that when women cook it is considered a necessity, but when men finally start cooking it is admired as art. By the way, do you like to cook?*

I enjoy cooking a lot, and I used to cook a lot. However, at some point I virtually stopped, because it is not fun to cook just for myself.

*The closer the end of our millenium comes, the more travelers, refugees, squatters, TV addicts, and homeless people seem to appear in your projects. No matter if they sleep in shelters, in hotels temporarily turned into refugee camps, in front of the running TV, or on airplanes, these subjects are global nomads. You put together an extensive airport series In the Place of the Public (1993), which explores the process of both domestication and commercialization of air travel, and I wonder how are you reflecting upon this nomadic subjectivity that seems to take over in these days?*

This is a very important issue not only for my work, but for the whole era we live in, and besides more traditional nomadisms, there is a new form - cyber-nomadism. However, I am allergic to the romanticization of nomadism, or global citizenship, which is particularly popular among artists. Traveling is a crucial part of my life as an artist, but it is not only exciting, it is very exhausting and sometimes even traumatic as well. Moreover, transnationalism is not only about traveling, but is inherently related to global commerce that increases the wealth dichotomy and establishes new colonial mechanisms.

*Nomadic subjectivity is also a bitter consequence of war for many people. Wars and their representation have been frequent themes in your work since the end of the 1960s through the 1990s. The more global the world becomes the more local wars seem to be. Even though information systems and mass-media let the whole world "see" what's happening in Kuwait, in Bosnia, or in Kosovo, and even though the multinational organizations such as NATO or the United Nations decide how the "world" (= the West) will react to these wars, these conflicts remain strictly localized. They are focused on identity politics which, if we realize the importance of such politics for the self-definition of minorities, is rather paradoxical and sad. Why do you work with such traumatic topics, and how do you see the representation of wars being transformed?*

To demand new identities always goes hand in hand with fracturing other, already

existing identities. For every movement that appears to be positive and liberatory, there is its dark side that turns to be destructive. The question of identity is related to the question of victimization which we already touched upon, and these are two vexed agendas of the postmodern era. Many wars that seem to depend on identity amount to the manipulation of nationalism by authoritarian rulers, and then again some theorists hold that all definitions of identity arise from situations of conflict. The fate of women in war is often neglected, even in the worst cases, such as the systematic use of rape as a military strategy.

War, as I understand it, is the most ultimate form of deterritorialization. I started to address this problem during the Vietnam War, but the initial reason for reflecting war conflicts in my work was certainly my Jewishness. I grew up with a precarious sense that the Holocaust - which is not the term we used in my family - could happen again, and this was reinforced by an actual danger of nuclear conflict during the Cold War. It was a total paranoia. The rhetoric of war was applied by the U.S.A. to every single element of social life during the 1950s, but, as you can see, wars continue to be declared against parts of American population even today: homeless people, taxi drivers, or artists showing “improper” images.

**Martha Rosler** is an artist who works primarily with photography, video, and installation. Since the 1970s, she has also been active as an art critic, writer, and curator. A retrospective of her work was touring in Europe between 1998 and 2000, and its last venue was the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the International Center of Photography in New York City. A catalogue accompanying the exhibition is entitled *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, Catherine de Zegher, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), and was also published in Spanish and German versions. Rosler’s other recent publications include *If You Lived Here: The City in Art, Theory, and Social Activism / A Project by Martha Rosler*, Brian Wallis, ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1991), *Rights of Passage* (New York: New York Foundation for the Arts, 1997), *In the Place of the Public: Observations of a Frequent Flyer* (Osfieldern-Ruit: Cantz, 1998), and *Passionate Signals* (in conjunction with the 5th International Spectrum Prize in Photography; Hatje/Cantz, 2005). Her notable essay on feminism and contemporary art in the former Soviet Union, “Some Observations on Women As Subjects in Russia,” was published in the exhibition catalogue, *After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen* (New York: Independent Curators, 1993). Recently, Rosler’s selected writings were published under the title *Decoys and Disruptions* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004).

## Art Institutions

### Empowerment and Responsibility

**Marcia Tucker**

*In 1977, you founded the New Museum of Contemporary Art, which became one of the most challenging art institutions in this country. The New Museum seems like a Kunsthalle-type of institution because it doesn't have any permanent collection, and yet collecting became an important aspect of your activities. Considering the fact that what is once contemporary becomes quickly historical, you introduced an unprecedented acquisition practice into the museum world that was based not on permanence but rather on fluidity. You called this hybrid and very organic concept "the semi-permanent collection." Could you explain this concept, and reasons that led you to such a radical redefinition of the traditional museum as a treasury back in the 1970s?*

When I started the museum, I wasn't interested in starting an alternative space. Rather, I was interested in trying to redefine what a museum could be in terms of contemporary art. When I worked at the Whitney Museum of American Art as a curator, it was clear that the contemporary area had become very complicated. In the mid-1970s there was an economic recession, and suddenly corporate sponsorship of exhibitions became a crucial factor for art institutions. This meant that contemporary art was the runt of the litter, so to speak, because, being the most controversial, it was the most difficult to fund. Moreover, as an art historian who had always worked in museums, I felt that if I were going to challenge a paradigm it needed to be the paradigm I knew best.

What defined museums as opposed to galleries or alternative exhibition spaces in that period was the collection, which struck me as highly problematic because it created a strict value system of hierarchies and judgements that I thought was inappropriate for works that had been made very recently. The second thing I saw

was that as museums focused increasingly on their collections, on acquiring works and showing them, and on looking for collectors to donate or to will their collections to the museum, they became increasingly out of touch with what was actually happening “today.” The resources taken up by the collection expanded at the expense of contemporary, experimental kinds of programs and exhibitions. Contemporary art is always fluid and changing, and its value is contingent; it calls for a very different kind of research and scholarship than a historical approach does. I thought that the only way to build a collection of contemporary art is to change it constantly and make it potentially transient in the way that cultural critic James Clifford talks about. The premise for putting together such an unusual kind of collection was to acknowledge that artistic value is not absolute, and to make transparent the critical and historical judgements that create the collection. I assumed that if the New Museum could collect, hold something for a certain period of time, and then either sell it or trade it for another work, it would help to create a more appropriate and more challenging kind of collection.

*How did you develop such a critique of the museum’s mandate from within the museum?*

When the museum first began, we acquired works in two ways. One was through a very small acquisitions fund coming from the trustees, and the other was through gifts from artists who were happy not only to have their works in the collection, but also to have it eventually sold to support other young artists’ work. The collection grew rather steadily. We tried to acquire at least one work from every exhibition, a work to be held by the museum for up to twenty years. Even though we didn’t show the collection very much, we sometimes picked a number of works from it for a special exhibition. However, my original intention was to tour the collection.

I assumed that after a period of ten or twenty years there undoubtedly would be some pieces which had no commercial value at all, and couldn’t be sold or exchanged; I wanted to group them, and donate them to institutions that had no real or interesting art, such as community centers, senior citizen’s residencies, or nursing facilities.

Another idea I had was to display the collection in a way that avoids the usual chronological structure. For me, chronology is an artificial history, and doesn’t necessarily do justice to the works of art, or create an appropriate context for them. This led me to begin thinking about different ways of displaying the collection: by affinities, by themes, or by issues important for a particular moment in history. Although we continued to acquire works of art over many years, it took us a while to do an exhibition of the entire collection, which we finally organized in 1995. The team that organized it consisted of several staff members - the junior curator, the registrar, the education curator, and the publications coordinator. Having such a



diverse and also unusual group of staff members working on a major show like this one allowed many new and fresh questions, ideas, and approaches to emerge. They did an amazing job, including putting together a catalogue which covered the history of the New Museum, the way in which the collection was built, and how it changed over time. Yet, to our great surprise and dismay, people had a difficult time understanding the concept of the collection. Some artists got very upset that their works would be sold again; but the group that was most outraged was the dealers. It made a lot of sense because the concept went against the art world convention, in which the value of a work of art is considered to be timeless or unchanging, and thus also commercially very easily exploitable. Not many people were able to disassociate themselves from this.

I knew that a radical transformation is always accompanied by a lot of criticism, so I didn't give up. I started to think about shaking up the paradigm again. The first idea I had was to continue maintain a collection, but to acquire only "ephemera," which no other museum does. The New Museum already had a number of works of this "nature" that could become the core of a collection, and the Artists' Advisory Board was very interested in the idea. The second concept I had wasn't popular with anyone, but was extremely fascinating for me. In the 1980s, I saw other museums booming. They were acquiring a lot of works of art, and expanding their facilities and their personnel to house, conserve, and show these works. While they were hiring the most famous architects to design large additions to the existing museum buildings, I started to feel that there was something wrong with this bombastic approach. I realized that no amount of expansion of either collection or facility could substitute for an absence of critical assessment, or fulfill the need for an intellectual, social, cultural, and political evaluation of the works in these institutions.

Thus, instead of increasing the physical bulk of the collection I wanted instead to expand its intellectual base. How could you do that? I thought about buying only one work a year, but having a series of debates and discussions taking place in the museum - with the board of trustees, curators, artists, young people, people from the neighborhood as well as from other countries. We would record all of these debates, put them into the computer, edit them, and publish them online. Why not dedicate a gallery space to one work, equip it with a number of computer stations, and offer it for a year to a graduate student or a young curator from elsewhere so that he or she could organize a series of exhibitions, workshops, or simply anything that a guest curator would want to do with and around the work and its topic? For me, this was a way to make issues relevant to both contemporary art and the museum structure itself more transparent than they usually are.

*This is an extremely interesting approach, but I see one "shady" aspect to it. As soon as you commit a special space in the museum to one work only, especially since this work is labeled as the "piece of the year", you very likely make it a masterpiece,*

*which - if I understand your project correctly - was exactly what you wanted to dismantle.*

This was the argument the Advisory Board made. However, I always considered the New Museum to be a smaller, more experimental space whose structure and program were fundamentally oriented against the idea of the masterpiece. Picking one work at the specific moment doesn't have to be about celebrating and canonizing it. For me, turning away from the auratization of a work of art meant it was possible to analyze it in depth, and contextualize it in order to make various visual and ideological mechanisms apparent - as well as show how arbitrary the categorization of art can be.

*Your idea of reconsidering museum practices seems to have a lot in common with the process-oriented, site-specific, and often very ephemeral works of art done at the end of the 1960s and in the 1970s. Was your "semi-permanent collection" connected to rethinking the notion of fixing art in time and place, which was so crucial for video, installation, body art, or performance in that period?*

If there was a connection between the two, it wasn't deliberate. Also not all art that was done during that period of time was taking place in open and public spaces, working with time-based media, or being produced through use of new technologies. There were still artists who used more traditional media and techniques, and it certainly didn't mean that their work was less interesting or less important. We should not forget that whatever appears to be the art of a particular decade is simply the art that has surfaced publicly through the activities of museum professionals, curators, critics, and dealers. As a curator, I have always been interested in all forms of art, and I always tried to reveal this selective aspect of historical and artistic value making in the New Museum as well.

*As James Clifford put it, 'the making of meaning in museum classification and display is mystified as adequate representation.' It seems that the New Museum has provided instead a model that destabilizes the authority of art history itself. How can one write history from a position which has this anti-preservationist perspective?*

In my opinion, art history should be thought in terms of history in general; with both, there is never one history but multiple histories, which must be examined from multiple perspectives. The authoritative version of history, which for the most part represented a white male perspective, has been dominant and unquestioned for so long that to start writing history differently is a very complicated process. However, I'm convinced that such a process is not only under way, but for some years now has been making major changes in the way we look at art and art history. An art historian

like Linda Nochlin has rethought many canonized styles and works of art from a totally new and very anti-authoritative perspective. The fight against the establishment of a “correct” version of art history, that is, a critical perspective, should be an imperative for anybody who deals with art of any period.

*Looking back over the exhibitions in the New Museum, it seems that group and issue- or theme-based shows were more dominant than monographic ones. Was this part of your attempt to introduce art as a discourse (which is an attempt strongly informed by feminist ideas) rather than a canon or an expression of “genuine” minds?*

This is a fiction people have about the New Museum! I find this story and the way in which it was constructed fascinating, but I have to object to this notion once again. Looking at the record of New Museum exhibitions, you can clearly see that there were a large number of solo exhibitions; in fact, we were very careful to create a balance between them and the issue-based projects. We had solo shows of artists like Leon Golub, Louise Lawler, the Komar and Melamid, Allan McCollum, Hans Haacke, Bruce Nauman, Andres Serrano, Ana Mendieta, Felix Gonzales-Torres, Christian Boltanski, Nancy Spero, Mary Kelly, as well as groups like Guerrilla Girls - to name only a few. However, you are absolutely right about structuring our shows - whether individual or group ones - as their discursive practices were more important than whether they were examples of what was “hot” at a particular moment in time. We wanted to emphasize the relationship between works of art and the world at large, because without that connection art - and contemporary art especially - becomes valued by only a few people within a very small, closed system. Moreover, only through making this relationship clear could various neglected groups, including women, finally emerge from obscurity, and the reasons for their historical and cultural dislocations be properly examined. I also firmly believe that if the connections between art and the world at large are clearly established, then not only do patriarchal or racist systems lose the means to exclude the “other”, but repressive groups and governments run out of arguments with which to attack contemporary art. It doesn't even matter what kind of “contemporary art” it is; during the Nazi regime it was non-objective or expressionist art, in Communist China it was something else. The very reason to use political power to repress contemporary artists is that their works engage people in a way that encourages them to think independently. Repressive governments see this kind of thinking as a potential source of societal subversion and revolution. It should be noted, though, that the kind of anxiety contemporary art still creates can be found in so-called democratic societies as well, and today's U.S.A. is certainly no exception.

*The New Museum has relatively quickly built its prestige on the contemporary art scene. It became remarkable not only for its challenging exhibitions but also for its relentless attempt to bring art into a larger context of intellectual endeavor, and*

*to undermine the notion that works of art are merely objects for aesthetic pleasure and possession. In 1984, you started a special publishing project "Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art." Books from this series such as Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation (1984), Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures (1990), or Mechanisms of Exclusion and Relation: Identity (1990), to name just a few, have been having a big impact on art, and its theory, history and criticism ever since. In the U.S.A., where the division between academia and museums/galleries is quite rigid, bringing together scholars, critics, curators, and artists to talk and write about contemporary art - something you did - is still a rather unique phenomenon. The only other initiative that might be comparable to yours (but which followed it by a few years) is the book project of the Dia Center for the Arts in New York. Why did this interdisciplinary communication become so important for your work?*

While the Dia Center publishing project was based on the symposia they did, the New Museum's project was conceptualized differently. I would like to emphasize again that dealing with contemporary art requires a different kind of inquiry and practice than traditional art history does. Moreover, the criteria of uniqueness, authenticity, or originality were dismantled by postmodernist theory, and to continue applying them to works of art in general - contemporary or historical - no longer holds water. Thus an inquiry based on a multidisciplinary and nuanced set of critical ideas could provide access and understanding for very difficult works of art we dealt with in the Museum.

When I was setting up this project, I wanted to hear artists' voices together with those from other disciplines so that their "polyphony" couldn't be drowned out by the authority of art historians and theorists. I wanted to unsettle the myth that artists are exclusively makers and not thinkers, and vice-versa, that thinkers have an elitist detachment from art practices. This is how it started, and it was an important impulse for avoiding a traditional reading of art. The way most books about contemporary art are written essentially follows the pattern of "Here is an artist; this is his/her background; these are his/her works; and this is the 'scene' at the time." For me, this is a very limited way of approaching art. I believe that the meaning of a work of art doesn't reside in the artist's intention nor in his or her biographical background, and similarly that it is not simply a reflection of the "scene." Rather, it is a complex web of all these things interacting with other more or less visible ideological mechanisms in our society.

*Before you founded the New Museum you worked at the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Unlike these large institutions, the New Museum became known for its criticality and anti-establishment orientation. At the same time, it soon became an authority in the intellectual world, and gained unprecedented power. To be powerful without either losing criticality or constructing*

*an intellectual ownership is usually very difficult. How did you manage to balance these two?*

For me it's a feminist task. Jane Gallop talks about the possibility of 'relinquishing authority from a position of authority'. I find this idea very compelling, but I also think that in such context power should be distinguished from responsibility. While I have never found power to be appealing, I have always been very interested in responsibility - not in terms of responsibility "for", but in terms of responsibility "to", someone or something. For all those years I spent at the New Museum, my so-called leadership skills were always under attack both from inside and outside. However, with time I realized that what others call a lack of leadership can really be a different kind of leadership, one based not on hierarchy and power, but on empowerment - communication, collaboration, listening, and consensus building. That's my idea of responsibility.

As for your question about intellectual ownership, my effort has always been to change things, not to preserve them, and that goes against any notion of owning the "truth". Of course, once you gain some recognition, it can be an invaluable tool in supporting radical ideas. Yet, instead of using it as a means for claiming power, I'd prefer to use it for dispersing power, even if it casts doubt on my own artistic position. In a 1995 essay, 'From Muse to Museum: Late twentyeth Century Feminism & Artistic Practice in the U.S.A.', I wrote that 'we clearly need to think not about substituting women's power for men's but about how to examine, critique, and unsettle the very "concept" of power, not just in terms of gender, but of race and class as well. But we need to think and to act.' For me a constant unsettling of power is a feminist project, and I still strongly hold to this notion.

*Assuming from the work of yours that I know, your lifelong engagement with feminism started back in 1968, around the time when Women's Movement hit New York. How did you become a feminist, and how did it influence your professional career?*

I'm not sure how somebody actually becomes a feminist. Part of what made it easy for me was that my father, who was a lawyer, always hoped that I would become a lawyer too in order to become his partner. His intent was very unusual for the 1950s. Even though he was very disappointed that I decided not to follow in his footsteps, he encouraged me in my scholarly and intellectual activities. In 1968, I went to a Red Stockings meeting, and that was a turning point for me, and the beginning of my commitment to feminism. I recall this meeting taking place in a huge room where there were gathered at least two hundred women. Being only with women was not just a totally new feeling, but also incredibly powerful and remarkable experience for me. About ten of us formed what became the longest-extant

consciousness-raising group in New York. The group lasted five years, and we still occasionally meet. Talking honestly with a group of women with whom you know you are completely safe opened up a new way of being for me. I found out that many other women shared my experience, which was extremely illuminating.

The personal became political for us; shared personal experiences have moved us into the dimension of action. For instance, our group participated in marches against the conditions in women's prisons, facilitated new consciousness raising groups in the arts, and did all kinds of organizational work to support women both inside and outside the arts. Then the first feminist books such as Betty Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*, came out. Understanding the particular mechanisms in which we as a "class" (and, ironically, a majority) have been oppressed resulted - at first - in rage. Fortunately, that rage had a focus; we tried to do something not only for ourselves but for other women as well. We met with groups of older women and with lesbian groups to see how and where the issues we dealt with overlapped, and how we could work together. However, there was one very problematic aspect of the movement, which we were very aware of - it was almost exclusively a white, middle class movement. But slowly the debates about feminism in relation to class and race started to take place, and the situation today is very different - at least in the U.S.A.. The book *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, the last publication of the New Museum's Documentary Sources series which I edited in 1998, clearly documents this transformation. One of feminism's greatest legacies for me personally was experiencing the pleasure of communicating and collaborating with others whose background and concerns were different from my own.

*The relationship between feminism, class, and ethnicity in the West might be much tighter today than it used to be. However, many Second- and Third-World countries, where feminist and gender agenda are only slowly being introduced into the social, political, and other discourses, are still ignored. Feminism is often thought of only within the geographical frame of the U.S.A. or Western Europe, which might be the most visible part of the world but there is still the "rest."*

*I am very happy to see books such as Talking Visions being published today. And yet, besides an increasing interest in racialized and gendered subjectivity that is dominant in books like this one, "other" women who are ethnically indifferent but who are located outside of the Western territory are often rendered invisible. Who I have in mind are, for instance, women in Eastern Europe (even though Russia might be an exception in a certain sense). It makes me wonder whether Western feminism's apparent disinterest in "others" of white color doesn't somehow substitute one system of exclusion with another?*

I don't think it's necessarily a question of ignorance by default. Rather, it may be

related to the fact that the process of transformation is never as fast as we would wish. Going to the former East Bloc countries and critiquing their attitudes about feminism, while at the same time having many issues here that still have not been properly explored or dealt with, seems questionable. Also, there is a great deal to be said for voices from outside the U.S.A. initiating their own feminist inquiries rather than having the West speak for them. However, deconstructing the problematic binary notions of “center” and “periphery”, and examining how any given group is marginalized - women among them - is an extremely important task for today’s feminism on a global scale.

*At least since the end of the 1980s, rumors about feminism’s death have been appearing not only in the mainstream press but also among a number of progressive intellectuals who welcomed the arrival of post-feminism. Many feminists, including, for instance Amelia Jones, pointed out that post-feminism is used to a certain extent to recuperate the feminist project back into a white, Western, and male humanist or critical theory project. Today, we witness a strong conservative comeback in countries like the U.S.A. which puts feminism in a very difficult position. What is in your opinion the role of feminism at the turn of the millennium, and what kind of strategies should it use to resist the appropriating power of the mainstream?*

I don’t believe that feminism ever “died,” or even came close to it. Whether these proclamations are driven by the optimistic belief that we have already won the battle, or whether they reflect a conservative backlash, we need to keep asking just who claims this premature death, and for what reasons. Feminism has never been just one thing; it is a very diverse movement with various perspectives, which makes its potential demise unlikely, and which also shows how superficially it is understood by all these “death” prophets. Like any other crucial political movements, feminism has morphed into other forms, or their proponents choose to call it by another name.

To me “post-feminism” doesn’t mean “after feminism,” but rather feminism from a certain moment on. I won’t believe the issue has died until there is no sign of gender inequality in the world we live in. Inequality shouldn’t be an issue only for women, but for men as well. As to the question of whether or not men can be feminists (an issue that has been debated for a long time), I think that any important movement for equal rights or civil liberties should include as many supporters as possible. Civil liberties extend across the board, and, as a feminist, I consider the civil rights issues of gays, lesbians, and people of color to be part of my battle.

*Your activities in art are always politically and socially engaged, and what you just said proves it. As a curator you of course deal with works of art and not with propaganda, but your approach significantly differs from apolitical or aestheticized approaches operating in most American museums.*

I think that since art is made by people, and since people are citizens, there is no such a thing as apolitical art, and curatorial strategies need to reflect and work with that fact openly. Curators, artists, critics, and art historians live in the real world, and they are engaged with it, whether they admit it or not. Unfortunately, many representatives of art institutions think that politics is anything other than their “own” politics. They take their politics as the norm, and we know that norm is never politicized because it preserves the *status quo* and its own fiction of universality. In my opinion, it’s important to remind people that the origins of the term “political” come from the Greek word “*polis*,” which has to do with the power relations in any given community of people. How can you then dismiss politics from your work when you run or work in any public institution? Power relations are present in every single thing we do, whether it is growing food, writing a law, fighting, teaching, or making art.

When I started to work at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1968, I was only twenty-eight, and I was the first woman curator to be hired since its founder who was a woman. Not only that I had to deal with all-male crews who occasionally did things like use vulgar language to see how I would respond but also in order to be accepted by the staff and by my male colleagues inside and outside the museum, I was expected to behave authoritatively and to write in a very “objective” and intellectually distanced way.

However, over the years I’ve moved away from that disembodied voice of authority. It was a very hard thing to do, but I gradually started to write in my own voice, with a bit of humor and a lot of attention to the world around me. I tried to make my writing both very personal and also very honest. The reason I decided to inscribe myself into the writing, so to speak, was not that I wanted to be narcissistic or even autobiographical. Rather, I realized that as soon as you position yourself as a real, tangible person, who is speaking, then you allow others to have their own opinion about what you’re saying. Then the writing is not only about you but about others as well, and this dialogical process makes the writing “political.” The same applies to organizing exhibitions. An “objective” exhibition is an illusion; there is always something deeply personal about choosing the artists, the topic, or even the way you want to display the work in it. But again, for me the personal is not about self-indulgence - it is an ideological position.

*Writing about art in a more personal way could be a risky and vulnerable business but I find this mode much more interesting than pretending that the person behind the text is an authority without body, feelings, emotions, and personality...*

One of the things that I’ve learned from feminism is that making a distinction between one’s personal and professional voice is possible, but it’s an artificial, hypocritical, and highly biased separation. Blurring those two voices together, I started to feel more secure about being less secure, about not having all the “right”



answers. To say “I don’t know” shouldn’t be humiliating or painful. Not only is it a very human condition, but it can also be extremely productive and challenging, because it makes you question what you think you unmistakably know. Giving up all these kinds of artificial hierarchies and qualitative distinctions allows you to enter into a much more interesting world, and even to surprise yourself from time to time.

*In 1995, you organized and curated a show called Bad Girls. The works of art that you selected for this show shared nothing with old-line feminist doctrines and, as the co-curator Marcia Tanner put it, they were “thoroughly unladylike”. How do contemporary feminist artists differ from their predecessors in the 1970s and 1980s?*

This question should be asked to the artists themselves, not me. As a curator and writer, I am bound by my own perspective and my generation. However, I can say that there are many ways in which feminist artists of today are very similar to their older “sisters,” and many ways in which they differ enormously. For one thing, we all want to be equally valued, to be paid equally for equal work, to have a voice in our own government, and to take charge of our own bodies. On the other hand, the feminists of my generation were, I think, more politically active than this generation, which has had the luxury of growing up with the rights and privileges that were hard-won by us older women. To be fair, I don’t think we had much of a sense of humor about our situation at that time. Distance has allowed women today - including artists - to see humor in our own private and professional situations and struggles. And I greatly appreciate this attitude.

*Most of the feminist shows are all-women shows. However, Bad Girls had a number of male artists, and besides repeating the misogynist naming of women as “girls”, it also included many sexually explicit images of both women and men. These “politically incorrect” features of the show aroused a lot of disagreement by some radical and anti-porn feminists. Did you want to be a “bad girl” yourself in order to rebel against feminist stereotypes?*

I didn’t want to be a “bad girl” at all. I just saw a lot of work being done that was very funny, and that was subversive through its use of humor. The works of art that caused so much fuss might have been sexually explicit, but they were not even remotely pornographic - they were humorous and not exploitative. I even took my (then) nine-year-old daughter to see the show, and she wrote an exhibition guide for children! As long as I can remember, I was interested in the power of humor and laughter, and to suddenly find so much of it in recent art works was incredibly enlightening, and also reflected something important at that particular moment in history. I used the title *Bad Girls* because it is an old expression connoting the subordinated and objectified status of women, which I wanted to turn on its head.

Although many people think that men can't be feminists, I disagree. So I decided to open up the territory traditionally assigned to "bad girls" to include men whose work also resists power and authority, and subverts social and cultural stereotypes in a feminist way. In my opinion, laughter is the first and finest form of self-criticism, and, when used by artists as a feminist tool, it can very effectively challenge even the biases which feminism itself sometimes constructs.

*You collaborated with children in other shows as well. The educational program has always been a very important part The New Museum's activities, and I wonder what are according to your experiences the most efficient ways of bringing a wider audience to the museums and galleries, and to dismantle the common notion of art as an elitist activity?*

In *Bad Girls*, I tried to show the close relationship between contemporary artistic practices and popular culture. Besides works of fine art, the exhibition included music, television, cartoons and comic books, and the work of local school children. This was certainly not a unique curatorial experiment for me because many other shows I did at the New Museum also focused on removing the barriers between "high" and "low" culture or "amateur" and "professional" art, as well as the isolation of art from quotidian life. One of the best examples of this strategy was a 1986 exhibition called *Choices: Making an Art of Everyday Life*.

My last exhibition at the New Museum, *The Time of Our Lives*, dealt with age and aging. It was very well attended, and I realized once again that in order to make contemporary art accessible to the public, one has to show how issues in the work concern everyone, and how we can use what we all know from our lives to understand art. Blurring the boundaries between the artistic and the everyday is not about selling out to commercialism, the entertainment industry or the mass media, even though you can learn to use what they've learned about communication. Rather, it is about building criticality, which would help to undermine a highly restrictive and elitist definition of art. To make art and the institutions that support it transparent could consequently help us to look in a more complex way at how our society is constructed.

*American feminist art activism represented by groups like Women's Action Coalition or Guerrilla Girls is, among other things, important also for this kind of criticality. Yet its political character represents only one aspect of what contemporary feminist art discourse is about. While feminist theory is often criticized for giving up political commitment, the activism-oriented feminists are accused of not adequately addressing the deeper reasons for male dominance that are connected to language, or psyche. I personally believe that theory could be as politically charged as action, and that this conflict (that very much mirrors the old controversy between essentialist and social feminism) unfortunately often reduces the complexity and*

*diversity of problems connected to sexuality, gender, and women's equality. Your work has always been politically and socially very engaged but it is significantly informed by theory as well. Before we will conclude this conversation, could you comment on how political, social, aesthetic and theoretical meanings are interwoven in feminist art?*

Well, that's a big question. Just as I believe that the eye, the mind, the heart or the hand are not separate human faculties, but are interrelated aspects of the same organism, I believe that you can't isolate the political from the social, the social from the aesthetic, the aesthetic from the theoretical or any combination thereof. All are part of the complex, interwoven fabric of ideas and actions that constitute any move toward social change, whether this move takes place directly in political lists or in art. The "either/or" formulation is a product of the eighteenth century Enlightenment's separation between mind and body, idea and emotion, reason and instinct - but we are living in the twenty-first century, when this approach is archaic and outmoded, and it's time to let it go.

**Marcia Tucker** is an art historian, curator, and writer. In 1977, she founded the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York City, which became one of the most challenging art institutions in the U.S.A.. As a director, she ran the Museum through 1998. Among her most remarkable exhibitions are *Not Just For Laughs* (1981), *Choices: Making Art of Everyday Life* (1986), *Bad Girls* (1995), *The Time of Our Lives* (1999), and many others. In 1984, she started a long-term publication project, "Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art," which generated a series of influential books, including *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, Brian Wallis, ed. (1984), *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Russell Ferguson, Martha Grever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Cornel West, eds. (1990), *Mechanisms of Exclusion and Relation: Identity*, (1990), and *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, Ella Shohat, ed. (1998), all of them published by the New Museum of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press. She has been the recipient of the Bard College Award for Curatorial Achievement and the Art Table Award for Distinguished Service to the Visual Arts, as well as four Yaddo fellowships. She is currently Distinguished Visiting Professor at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles, and has completed a memoir entitled *A Short Life of Trouble*, covering over four decades in the fast lane of the museum world.

## Art Institutions

### Maybe Feminism Has Just Begun

**Carol Duncan**

*Some feminists argue that only a synthesis of Marxism and feminism can emancipate women because it challenges both the capitalist and patriarchal structure of Western society, and shows the relationship between the construction of women's internal and external social experience. It is well known that the marriage between Marxism and feminism is not always a happy one, but the work of many feminist scholars in the U.S.A., including your own, would look quite different without this "bond". How did these two theories/practices come together in your life and work?*

My interest in both feminism and Marxism grew together organically. During the time I was in graduate school in the 1960s, there was no such thing as feminist art history and only faint traces of anything you could call Marxist art history. The governing approach was the study of artistic styles, understood largely as a formalist problem. Although there was a rich tradition of iconography, developed especially by German art history, the study of subject matter was not as glamorous scholarly project as style. Even at that time, I was struck by how little discussion there was about the scholarly paradigms people used - it was as if they were self-evident and universal, and required no examination or any counter-models. Yet once you posed a question that led even slightly in the direction of social or political context, a door opened for a more challenging examination of art and visual culture in general. I took a path that led from the "higher" sphere of neo-Hegelian history that dominated the field "down" into social and political history - into the "dirtier" historical strata that art (understood in its spiritual purity) was supposed to transcend.

My dissertation dealt with French Romantic art. It started as a thesis about the Rococo revival in France in the nineteenth century, and it took me into a lot of little corners of French art that the established David-to-Delacroix model could not account

for. Once outside that model, the relevance of social and ideological questions couldn't be ignored. The material I studied led me naturally into questions about the class identity of artists and their patrons, and the strategies they used to claim or maintain or escape from class identities. I hadn't yet read Marx, and I certainly wasn't trying to write a "Marxist art history." But my research did teach me that if I wanted to be a good art historian, I would have to pay very careful attention to historical context - not just the intellectual and cultural history of a time, as the discipline already allowed, but also social, political, and economic history - or, for that matter, any other kind of history that touched on art. Eventually, when I did read Marx, his dialectical approach made great sense to me.

In the Spring of 1968, I was in the midst of my doctoral research at Columbia when the university was brought to a standstill by student protests against the war in Vietnam (and war-related research conducted at Columbia), and against racism (blatantly visible in the university's planned take-over of a neighboring park used by African Americans). For many of us on campus, the ensuing days amounted to an exhilarating short course in institutional politics and collective action. In brief, the liberal officers of the university, faced with protesting students who had seized various campus buildings, called in the police that (being working-class, meat-and-potatoes all-American cops) hated the affluent students and routed them with deliberate violence.

The university's use of force to end what was essentially a debate about moral values taught me a valuable lesson about the limits of liberalism and the violence it resorts to when its legitimacy is threatened. Some of my professors, venerated as "humanist" scholars by their students, seemed utterly blind to their own positioning in the university and saw no connection between themselves and the questions of moral and political responsibility that the crisis raised. Watching these prominent representatives of a liberal humanist discipline that paraded itself as a custodian of higher values made me worry. In the process of "mastering" it, how much of the attitudes and expectations of these professionals had I absorbed without thinking? Their way of disconnecting the politics of their professional lives in the university from the politics of the world outside appeared to replicate art history's avoidance of the social and the political meanings of art? I needed to find out in what ways my training had transformed me into a component of a machine I didn't like but would be dependent on for the practice of my profession. The events of 1968 led many of us to begin asking feminist questions, too - not so much because of the university's patriarchal policies, but because of the outrageously sexist attitudes of the protesting male students, who, it turned out, expected their female comrades to supply various comforts but not to decide policy.

So I set about reading intellectuals who wrote critically about culture - people such as Raymond Williams and E. P. Thompson, and Herbert Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School - and these writers opened up for me many issues

about art and society. They gave me an introduction to concepts of ideology and to a kind of scholarship that was far richer and more vital than the narrow versions of it I learned in graduate school. One upshot of all of this is that for a long time, the last place I felt I belonged was in the center of established academia, least of all in some prestigious academic institution where I would be expected to transmit to others the conventional practices of the discipline. I should add that most prestigious universities felt the same way about me - that I didn't belong in them.

*But your work is part of the art historical discourse today. You have a teaching position, you publish extensively, and your texts are included in most major readers and anthologies...*

I'm very glad that my work has been recognized and that it's read by scholars and students. And by now, there has been a full turnover in academia. Those teaching in graduate schools are far more interesting and diverse in their approaches than their counterparts a generation ago. In fact, in recent years, I've done guest teaching in many big, prestigious research universities. I do sometimes wish for a lighter teaching load - I work in a little state college, and I teach two or three times more classes than most university professors. I have much less time to do research and write than people in research universities, but unlike many of them, I enjoy a congenial, completely unpretentious atmosphere. My teaching situation forces me to make my material interesting and understandable to students who do not come from elite backgrounds. I suppose I occupy an "in-between" position academically, but it provides me with a lot of freedom. I was actually fired from my first teaching appointment at a prestigious little college for overemphasizing the social aspect of art history (or so I was told) at the expense of "art appreciation". I wrote about it in an article called 'Teaching the Rich' in 1973. The days when you could be fired for something like that are long gone, but graduate-school teaching in the States carries with it other bothering pressures and annoyances that I would also want to avoid.

*It seems to me that nobody wants to be identified with the mainstream, center, or authority these days, even the status of an outsider is often romanticized. I too believe that marginality or what you call an "in-between" position can provide a clearer insight, but I'm also worried about new stereotypes generated by an uncritical glorification of such a position. How can we avoid critical discourses turning into self-promoting and self-assuring truisms?*

I suppose that this allure of marginality is like the idea of the avant-garde in art - it is a wish to be outside of the mainstream, bourgeois cultural machine. And yes, people can try to make careers out of being perpetually on the margins. But, what

looks marginal at one moment can look very mainstream at another. The rise of theory in recent decades, and the extraordinary proliferation of competing critical discourses have redefined the boundaries of the field so often, it's hard to keep track of where the center is any more. Given the speed with which critical theories appear and the hunger of the academic market place for new fashions, I wonder if the figure "margin/center" is useful any more. The issue it evokes has always been how we relate what we do as scholar-intellectuals to what's going on outside the academy, and the rise of theory has made that more difficult in many ways.

*You have mentioned the student movement of the late 1960s, Marxism, the Frankfurt School, and the social history of art as primary inspirations for your work, but all of them usually subordinate the issues of gender to those of class. How do you negotiate this tension?*

I should say first that, long before I knew the work of Marx or Raymond Williams or any other Marxists, I read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. It was in 1960 and the book astonished me. It made it possible for me to think about what would later become important feminist questions. I should emphasize that I could only begin to think about such things - I couldn't do more until feminism became a movement again and these questions could be asked collectively. Later, at the end of the 1960s and in the early 1970s, when feminism had finally come out of what seemed a hibernation, I re-read *The Second Sex*, and once again relished the richness and brilliance of its insights. I found de Beauvoir's existentialist approach especially appealing. I still like a lot about it - in particular the way it situates woman's consciousness both in the biological body and in historical and social experience. De Beauvoir saw into how deeply gendered Western culture is, and to what extent the category "woman" is a projection of male interests, fears and fantasies. I'm sure I absorbed her ideas in ways I no longer even remember. Certainly reading her helped me cross between gender and class issues in my own work, since she thought a lot about Marxism and was a part of the French intellectual left herself. I can't say that I resolved the tension you mention in any definitive way, but whatever the theoretical difficulties, feminism and Marxism seemed equally necessary to account for the complexities of social relations - those between sexes as well as classes.

*Beauvoir introduced the concept of the constructed nature of gender into feminist thinking but she was also criticized for designating women as the Other or the negative of men which is itself seen as a phallic construct. You're saying how much you value her work, and I wonder how can her existentialist philosophy be used in contemporary feminism?*

It struck me some time ago that contemporary feminism was greatly in need of

something like existentialism. After years of deconstructing the subject, we got to the point where the self was totally dissolved in relativity, and it was quite impossible to theorize a human entity with a psychic center - let alone a being capable of action. I realized that existentialism (which had pretty much fallen off the theoretical radar screen) would be a good thing to reconsider, since it allows for a subjective self - not as something fixed or even unified, but as something that grows up within and in dialectical response to complex biological, social, cultural, and other causes. Beauvoir said that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, and the body is always a part, if not the whole, of one's situation.

*Yes, she even suggested that the female body should be the instrumentality of women's independence and freedom rather than their prison.*

If I could go back to the first part of your question, unless I seriously misread it, I see nothing of this notion of women as the negative of men in her writing. One mustn't confuse the messenger with the bad news. In *The Second Sex*, she says that women are forced by the real relations of power - the relations they live - to see themselves as Other, and she precisely invites us to contest that. That is another thing that existentialism might help us think about today - a way of seeing ourselves as moral and historical actors. It scares me to see how popular are the politics of turning-away-from-politics in contemporary American academia. De Beauvoir's work gives us a creative subject that can act in opposition to existing social relations. It may be that the existentialists got carried away with the possibility for individual self-invention, but compared to some theoretical ideas fashionable today, especially those that can find causality only in cultural forms, the existentialist concept of a rational subject that can think and act is refreshing. Which brings me to the Enlightenment. It seems to me that throwing away the whole of the Enlightenment is as arrogant and foolish as despising existentialism. We might live in the so-called post-Enlightenment era but by single-mindedly and blindly undermining any suggestion of rationality we fail to acknowledge things the Enlightenment brought that we value and need. I know how totally unfashionable it is to say this, but just as there are things I like about existentialism, so there is much about Enlightenment I want to keep and build on - its fight against religious dogmatism and extremism, for example, against forces that directly threaten the self-realization of both women and men in many parts of the world, including, of course, the U.S.A. where the right to control one's body is constantly under attack by a fanatically religious right. Nor should we forget that it was the Enlightenment that introduced a new approach to human rights and worked out the fundamental rationale for it - one we still use.

*But what does the Enlightenment's emphasis on brotherhood and fraternity say,*



*for instance, about civil rights for women? Besides praising the values of this humanist project, shouldn't we also question its "shady" side, including its constructions of a gendered hierarchy or normative aesthetics?*

Of course we should question them, but why should we be surprised that Enlightenment thought is full of contradictions? Yes, a lot of its ideas were far from rational - they were even bizarre and obscure - and there are endless examples of horrible things done to people that can be blamed on Enlightenment modes of generic and hierarchical thinking. But, let us not forget that feminism itself is an Enlightenment project even if it was a recessive or merely implicit one during the Enlightenment - as is the struggle for equal rights and freedoms by people of color, gays, lesbians, and other "Others" (religious minorities, handicapped people, and so on). When reason is used as a tool to dominate the human body and repress sensuality or to destroy the natural environment in the name of progress and technology, it is certainly oppressive. This is where one needs a concept of ideology to sort out causes, and also to distinguish between an instrumental use of reason and reason as a principle of human freedom. Oppression almost always works in the interests (or perceived interests) of an oppressor - by which I mean actual persons, classes, and groups of people. It doesn't mean that everything that comes from reason is automatically suspect or that one should reject all of "the Enlightenment" as a homogenous ideology of repressive reason.

*Although studying the representation of women in history - be it women artists or women as models - is usually associated with the first stage of feminist art historical research, it is still one of the crucial tasks for any scholar in this field. However, the concept of gender has opened other problems, including the construction and representation of masculinity. You published a number of important essays focused on images femininity but is there any "imprint" of the male body in your work?*

Let me say first that in my view, since you mention it, the division of feminist art history into distinct stages can obscure the history of feminist thought as much as it might clarify it. As you point out, many of the concerns of the so-called "first stage" remained important later. In addition, the very term ignores the existence of women who were full of feminist insights in the early twentieth century, for example, Mary McCarthy. Besides, even in the "first stage", there were diverse approaches. My own project was never to rescue women artists from oblivion in order to give them "equal" status to male heroes of art history, a project that, in my view, left aside the whole question of "art history" as a construct, and also rested on an unexamined notion of what feminism is all about. What interested me instead was the history of women's possibilities as socially and politically constructed and as culturally mediated, which,

of course, involved questions of male interests and aspirations as well as women's. Nor do any of these questions make much sense without also considering broader contexts.

In the 1970s, I wrote two articles about art from around the time of the French Revolution that reflected these concerns. One of them was called "Happy Mothers," the other "Fallen Fathers" (they both appear in my book *The Aesthetics of Power*). When I was working on this material, patriarchy was the target of a lot of feminist criticism but it was mostly taken as an eternal, unchanging source of women's subordination, and there wasn't much attention given to how it varied in different times and places, including the different ways it organized the social and psychic lives of men. "Happy Mothers" had been about the emerging ideal of the modern family in French bourgeois culture in the decades before the French Revolution. "Fallen Fathers" explored the corresponding changes in political ideology. It argued that the emergence of the bourgeois state was related to both the new culture of domesticity and also to a new political identity for the bourgeois male - that of the citizen. I got at these issues through an examination of paintings and prints from the second half of the eighteenth century. My aim in part was to demonstrate how hard the art of the time worked to produce social and political messages, and that without some consideration of those issues, one can't really grasp the different meanings of the various genres of eighteenth century French art.

*You pointed out many times how often art historians, critics, and curators treat the content of everyday life as irrelevant, and how they create a kind of aura or "aesthetic detachment" around works of art. You are an uncompromising critic of both artistic formalism and transcendentalism (that very often overlap), and your work helped to undermine many recurrent myths about conflation of the moral and the aesthetic in works of art, especially in the field of abstraction. As your book The Aesthetics of Power suggests, aesthetics can be a very authoritative ideological tool. Yet, doesn't your emphasis on iconography draw you sometimes unnecessarily too far away from appreciating the visual aspects of works you deal with?*

I admit it's not always easy to find the right balance between the two phenomena, but I also don't conceive them as fundamentally separable as they used to be thought of a generation ago. I have never denied the importance of aesthetics, since I hold it to be one of the dimensions of our existence, and I try to take formal configurations into account whenever I see a way to do that. But, remember that at the time I began to write, and for many years after that, it was usual to treat the history of art as a series of styles conceived largely in formal terms. That is less true today, especially in university seminars, but these new ideas have been slow to enter museum culture.

Your question refers specifically to a chapter in my other book, *Civilizing Rituals*, in which I point to what has been the dominant way of telling the story of modern art, namely as a series of ever more abstract styles. In the discourse of formalist art

history, this phenomenon of increasing abstraction was described as an ever more uncompromising renunciation of everyday existence (including its material and biological needs) and, concomitantly, an ever more urgently felt drive for some higher, purer “truth.” I found these ideas repeatedly, especially in the critical and art-historical writing of the 1960s and 1970s when the influence of Clement Greenberg was at its height, but later, too. It is especially in that writing that I noticed that the celebration of the “aesthetic” achievement of abstraction was also an ideological celebration of individual moral triumph (of the heroic artist), and, as such, a demonstration of the “freedom” of the Western capitalist system. My intent was to pierce the protective envelope of aesthetic value and expose its ideological load. I should add (in response to your original question) that I do not accept that the “appreciation” of the visual (or formal) aspects of art, what is often taken as its “aesthetic” value, ever happens in an ideological vacuum.

*It seems that you directly associate this “progress” toward greater abstraction with patriarchal cultural order. No matter how much gender-bias you can detect in abstract art, there have always been excellent women artists producing either abstract painting, or contributing to its development through other techniques and materials of, mainly, decorative arts. Why are feminist art historians and critics so rarely “friends of abstraction”?*

Yes, it has been claimed that abstraction - in thought and in art - is less natural to women than to men. I certainly don't agree with that or with the idea that there is a specifically feminine aesthetics, style or set of materials. It is true, however, that certain abstract styles, for example, American Abstract Expressionism, were dominated by men and associated with male drives for spiritual transcendence. Yet, there were and are extraordinary women abstract painters (a whole group of them in Russia, in the 1910s and 1920s), and if abstract art has sometimes been gendered as male, it's not because of any inherent meaning in abstraction itself but because of how it has been masculinized by artists and their critic friends at particular times. That is what I tried to challenge in my work - not abstraction *per se*.

*Abstract art has played a prominent role in the iconographic programs of many American museums, and you addressed this issue in your work very early on. Your first texts on museums came out in the mid-1970s, and you have gradually become one of the most respected thinkers and critics in the field of the museum studies in this country. What drew you to this field?*

The beginning of my interest goes back to 1976. At that time, I joined a group of artists who were protesting a big show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The show featured the Rockefeller Collection of American Art and was part of the bi-

centennial celebration of the American Revolution. It was entitled *Two Centuries of American Art*, but it should have been called *Two Centuries of Art by White American Men* since that's what it contained (with one or two exceptions). Our group published a critique of this show, and in the many discussions we had preparing it, I became increasingly interested in art museums.

I suppose, like many people, I had thought of art museums as more or less neutral containers for art, but now I began to realize they did much more than merely house art objects. They were elaborate symbolic structures, powerful engines of ideology that have taken over some of the functions fulfilled in the past by sacred architecture. Alan Wallach and I argued about these ideas in two articles published in 1978 and 1980. The first one appeared in *Marxist Perspectives* and was called 'The Museum of Modern Art As Late Capitalist Ritual'. It treated the museum as a ritual that visitors perform by walking through its programmed displays. Once we looked at it in those terms, we discovered some surprising things. Perhaps the most startling was the MoMA's resemblance to ancient and primitive labyrinth rituals. Like them, the museum's program was structured to take visitors, implicitly defined as males, through a kind of drama in which they reenact an ordeal and triumph of the spirit. In the context of the museum's program, abstract works were frequently positioned near some of the MoMA's many images of threatening female bodies, providing viewers with an escape to a realm of spirit that transcended the female world of matter and flesh and biological need. Finally, we argued that the purified self that the museum ritual produces makes a perfect ideological fit with the capitalist culture of the present. While working on this project, Alan and I often felt like anthropologists, engaged in researching the strange primitive structure of the modern male psyche.

From the very beginning of this work, it was the idea of the museum as a ritual site that got under my skin. I'm not sure I can summarize it here very well - in *Civilizing Rituals*, I take a whole chapter to set out my ideas - but at the core of it is the concept of liminality, which I learned from the anthropologist Victor Turner. This concept lets us distinguish between the kind of attention we give to everyday, mundane concerns and the different, more intense kind of attention we call forth when we enter a sacred site, or when the lights dim in a theater or concert hall or when we enter an art gallery. At such moments, we cross a threshold into a liminal or ritual space or time. The modern concept of aesthetic experience is but one way to formulate this liminality, which is also identified with many religious experiences. Within the museum's liminal space, visitors pass through series of rooms and walk past arrangements of art objects. Together with the architectural settings and installations, all of these elements form a museum's program, or ritual scenario. Visitors perform it (well or poorly, depending on their background and interest) simply by moving through it and taking it in. By walking through certain narratives and enacting the ritual identities implicit in them, visitors live out ideological

values as vivid, immediate, concrete experiences - in this way the museum gets them to live symbolically ideas that may have developed through quite different social and political content. Museums are very powerful identity-defining machines or, as Ivan Karp put it, they are 'privileged arenas for presenting images of the self and "other"', but these ideological functions are usually well hidden behind the "veil" of pure aesthetics and overwhelmed by the rhetoric of connoisseurship. People actually do a lot of ideological work in museums, but they rarely have the concepts that would help them to be aware of this. Instead they follow the script that museum culture lays for them. They become pilgrims who seek out the world's spiritual treasures and are uplifted by their wondrous sight.

*The notion of a "great artist" has had an enormous impact on art history, and museum collections are usually built around those works of art that were signed by such "prodigies". In your book you have shown how the modern state appropriates this notion to demonstrate the highest form of civic virtue, and to make citizens know themselves as civilized. Nevertheless, the "genius" is gendered male, and however universal the modern citizen is claimed to be, it embodies male values as well. One of the chapters in your book is entitled "The Modern Art Museum: It's a Man's World", but how can it be otherwise? How can the museums become also a woman's or, actually, everybody's world?*

Different kinds of museums present different problems. The chapter you mention was about museums of modern art, and also modern wings in general museums. Their character could certainly be modified by displaying in them more works by women, lesbians, gays, and non-white peoples. But, such inclusion by itself is not sufficient. The problem is much more complicated. The whole culture of the art museum and its entrenched display practices have assumed an ideal visitor who is a white middle- or upper-class man, and this legacy is still very alive. The museum's ritual subject has been a man even when the actual visitor is a woman, and it is this ritual subject whose interests and needs have structured the museum's program. Thus the question is how can the museum be made to address all of its visitors?

In this country, most of the big museums have thought a great deal about making women more comfortable as visitors. So they serve more salads and light food in their cafeterias, and they sell jewelry, scarves and other female accessories in the gift shops. The trouble with this approach is that women are seen almost exclusively as shoppers (and only a minority of mostly well-off women at that). While men are treated as art connoisseurs and bearers of knowledge, women are treated as agents of consumption, and the gendered character of museum galleries is left as is. Of the museums I have visited, the Museum of Modern Art's galleries were the most masculinized, to a point that I can only call hysterical. Hopefully this will change when the new, expanded MoMA reopens in a couple of years. The

installation of modern art I liked most is in the Art Institute of Chicago. It unfolds in a broadly chronological way, but includes several thoughtful thematic rooms - for example, a room full of political art and one exploring a whole range of statements about love - so that the whole emphasis is on the variety of modern art and the variety of its protagonists. Needless to say, it's an approach that makes it easy to fit in women, black artists, other "Others". It's much richer and more interesting than the old style-after-style program, and it offers a way to finally demasculinize the existing museum structures, at least where modern art is concerned.

*Contemporary American academia might be more specialized in language and is sometimes overly theoretical, but it is here where many critical and challenging issues and methods are deployed in these days. What is the reason that such discourses have won much less ground in American museums?*

The "new art histories" have touched American museums to some extent, but we have to acknowledge that museums have a different position in society than colleges or universities. I don't want to oversimplify this difference but it seems to me that it is much easier to sit in a seminar room with a group of ten or fifteen students, and agree on the importance of critical, oppositional approaches to culture. In the academic world, one is rewarded for such work. But in museums, you depend on the approval of trustees and the support of a public, and sometimes even the OK of government officials, and all or most of these people are likely to be years behind current academic debates. So whether you want to or not, you can't be as critical or radical or oppositional or whatever it is you would like to be. To be under such a pressure and still be challenging is very difficult, and it requires a lot of courage and, most importantly, a lot of responsibility. The height of the museum world also constitutes the most prestigious and visible accumulation of cultural capital, which is to say it's the cultural face of concentrated political power and economical capital, too. So to be a radical in a place like the MoMA is not only harder but also less likely than in smaller art institutions. For that reason, I am more interested in the smaller, more "peripheral" museums these days. It seems to me that it is there where really challenging and innovative art and curatorial practices can be found.

*While feminist art historians and critics used to emphasize the politics of social transformation, they now focus more on the scholarly and academic dimension of their work. You have been involved in this field for the last thirty years, and I would like to know what does this transformation mean for you, and how do you envision the role of feminism in the new millenium?*

Let us recall that the American feminism that rose up in the late 1960s and

which was so strong in the 1970s, was part of a broad movement to extend rights and privileges not only to women but also to other so-called minorities. The civil rights movement helped ignite the women's movement. It's true that many academic feminists today seem less preoccupied with social change and less moved by visions of social justice than was once the case. However, there has always been a tendency for feminism to subside into a movement to empower middle-class women in their careers (which is certainly not a bad thing). On the other hand, it's also true that many women teaching in colleges and universities are still committed to social change. They are still thinking, writing, and organizing around issues of social justice for all women, and there are some powerful voices - Nancy Fraser, bell hooks, or Kate Soper, among others - that insist on the importance of practical politics to realize feminist aims. It's just that one doesn't often read or hear about them in the more trendy theoretical academic journals.

As for predicting the future contribution of feminism: the roots of any significant movement are so multiple and complex, I wouldn't know where to begin to look for any future trend. It does seem that, at least in the Western democracies, feminism has thrived when there have been other strong progressive movements, but it's hard to predict what forms these might take. Certainly the recent protests against the World Trade Organization - protests that forged alliances between environmentalists and Labor - hold promise for the future, especially since what is at stake concerns everyone on the globe. It seems obvious to me that feminists from all over the world, but especially from the post-colonial countries, have a vital contribution to make to this kind of coalition. Feminism is not going to go away - it is needed locally as much as it is needed globally. Today, women as women are still oppressed in many parts of the world, and in some places their situation has gotten worse. What is different today is that there is a living legacy of feminist thought and practice that is in the process of being accessed by women in scores of languages and cultures. Feminism is there, in historical experience, in art and literature, in thought and memory. There is a whole culture of feminism that can touch even the most repressed feelings of women, awaken in them new aspirations for self-determination, and help them formulate a language with which to demand freer, fuller lives. Maybe, feminism has just begun.

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