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Papers from the panel Historiography/Feminism/Strategy at the College Art Association conference, 26th February 2000, New York. Organised by the CAA Committee for Women in the Arts

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I would say that one of the most important, and interesting, developments in feminist art history in the past decade has been the turn to the question of the gendering of culture itself. This has meant, among other things, getting away from some rather sterile (and sometimes hostile) debates, including in the pages of the Art Bulletin in the mid-1980s (e.g. Thalia Gouma-Peterson & Patricia Mathews 'The Feminist Critique of Art History' Sept.1987 Vol LXIX, No.3 & 'Reply' in March 1989 Vol.LXXI, No.1).

These oppositions are pretty familiar, though they have taken different forms: 1970s vs.1990s feminism; American vs. British (or French) feminism; celebratory vs. deconstructive art practice, and so on. Argument about these issues has occupied scholars and critics in relation to each of the three main areas of feminist concern - namely the study (and rediscovery) of women artists and their work; the representation of women and gender in visual culture; and the question of feminist art practice. It is not so much that these questions have been resolved, but rather that the focus has shifted to a more fundamental problem - namely the “gendering” that goes on in the production of art and culture more generally. I have come to think that this rather different emphasis allows us to continue to talk about art practice and about representation, but without getting stuck in debates about essentialism, or questions about the difference between men’s and women’s work. I will explain this in relation to some of my own recent and current interests - three short examples.

In a study of women artists in the Whitney Studio Club, in the two decades leading up to the founding of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1931, my initial
assumption was that the virtual disappearance of almost all of these artists from the historical record (and from the museum) was the usual case of gender-related exclusion. Many of these artists (Peggy Bacon, Katharine Schmidt, Dorothy Varian, for example) were very successful, and highly visible, during those decades, and indeed for another twenty years after the Museum’s founding. (Their works were included, for example, in the 1949 Memorial Exhibition for Juliana Force at the Whitney.) It was also clear, though, that the male artists associated with that group did not fare much better (though the names of Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Alexander Brook and Guy Pène du Bois are perhaps better known than those of their women colleagues). The real story of exclusion here, of course, is the well-known narrative of the ascendancy of modernism (or rather a particular Barr/Greenberg/MoMA version of modernism), and the consequent sidelining and marginalization of other forms of twentieth-century art. The realist and figurative painters of the teens and twenties are constructed as second-rate and out-of-date by this narrative. (The more recent revival of such work - for instance in the 1995 exhibition of the Ashcan painters in Washington, Metropolitan Lives, and in the Whitney Chadwick's own American Century 1900-1950 last year - is something that interests me a great deal, but that's another matter.) Eventually I came back to the question of gender in this study - no longer in terms of looking for the processes of exclusion of women and their work, but through a recognition that the opposition of modernism/realism in the post-War period was itself gendered. The relative feminization of realism, then, becomes the more important insight, and not least because it renders irrelevant any debates about gender essentialism.

My second example is the flâneur. Fifteen years ago, I wrote an article about the impossibility for women to inhabit this role, and hence the invisibility of women in the literature of modernity, in which the flâneur appears as a central figure (reprinted in J. Wolff Feminine Sentences Cambridge: Polity,1991). I’ve come back to this question once or twice in the meantime, and others have suggested ways in which women could, in fact, occupy the role of flâneuse - for example, in shopping or cinema-going. Now I am inclined to think about this question from a somewhat different point of view, exploring instead the very constitution, in critical and historical thought, of the category of “modernity”. If the definition of “the modern” privileges the anonymous city stroller (and I still maintain that this figure is paradigmatically and practically a man), then we must reconsider the ways in which we conceptualize modernity - for example, by placing less emphasis on the street and the public arena, and exploring the intersections of home and work, family and enterprise, city and suburb, men’s and women’s work.

Lastly, I am interested (as are a number of other feminist art historians) in looking at “the feminine” in modern art. I think that it is time to retrieve this category for feminism, in order, as Griselda Pollock has put it, to decipher ‘inscriptions in the feminine’, which will allow us to ‘confront the difference of women as other than
what is other to [the] masculine order while exposing the politics of dominant discourses and institutions’. Of course we have also, in the past, needed to do considerable critical work on the manipulation of the concept of “the feminine” in the service of the denigration of women’s work. But we are now well placed to address the question of the discursive and ideological constitution of gender in art-critical and art-historical practice.