

Mobile Fidelities

Conversations on
Feminism, History and Visuality

Martina Pachmanová

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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 United States, 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.

Natalie Boymel Kampen is Ann Whitney Olin Professor of Women's Studies and Art History at Barnard College of Columbia University in New York City. In 1989, she founded the annual Barnard Feminist Art and Art History Conference, which became an important and highly challenging international forum for discussing and examining gender and feminist issues in visual culture, art history, and their methodologies. Kampen has written a number of books and essays, mostly focused on Roman sculpture and iconography. She is the author of *Image and Status: Representation of Roman Working Women at Ostia* (Berlin: Mann, 1981), and editor of the influential *Sexuality in Ancient Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Her essay 'Social Status and Gender in Roman Art' was published in the seminal book *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982). Kampen collaborates with academic magazines such as *The American Journal of Archeology*, *L'Antiquité Classique*, and others. She is currently at work on a book about Roman family imagery.