

# Mobile Fidelities

Conversations on  
Feminism, History and Visuality

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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., 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 US 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 US 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 United States. 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 US 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 US 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 US 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 it is 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?”.

**Janet Wolff** is Professor of Performance, Screen and Visual Cultures at the University of Manchester. She was Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the School of the Arts at Columbia University (2001-6), and a co-founder of a unique interdisciplinary program of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Rochester, New York, where she taught for a number of years (1991-2001). Her work is strongly informed by sociology, from which she obtained her Ph.D. at the University of Birmingham. Her books include *Hermeneutic Philosophy and the Sociology of Art* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981), *Aesthetics and the Sociology of Art* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1983), *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), and *AngloModern: Painting and Modernity in England and the U. S.* (Cornell University Press, 2003). Examining issues such as ideology of cultural production, the role of gender and ethnicity in modern culture, or feminism and body politics, she has published numerous articles in edited books, magazines, and exhibition catalogues.