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I find it very difficult to position myself within feminist aesthetics because I see myself as a feminist art critic: i.e. someone who looks at art practice first and then writes and thinks about it rather than someone who writes philosophy but this is not to say reading philosophy doesn't help me think. Aesthetics as a form of philosophical practice is useful to feminist thinking and aesthetics itself may be changed and challenged by a critical examination of women's art practice.

Does feminism have a particular aesthetic? What's the difference between a feminine and a feminist aesthetic? If there did exist a feminist aesthetic in the singular, would all feminists then be obliged to subscribe to the same aesthetic? Or would ownership or, at least, recognition that one practiced within such an aesthetic force one to label oneself feminist? Does feminism propose a separate aesthetic from the range of aesthetic theories already in circulation? Does a feminist aesthetic arise when a feminist – or a feminist perspective – critiques a theory within aesthetics?

These are the kind of questions which spring to mind when feminist aesthetics is raised as a topic of conversation. As a result of such questions I find it very difficult to subscribe to the idea of a singular feminist aesthetic or the idea of feminist aesthetics, even conceived in the plural. So, if I prefer to use feminist art criticism when speaking of the question of feminist aesthetics in an international frame, I want to use this term to refer to the problematic proposed by feminism when discussion of women's art practice takes place.

To frame this more precisely, my paper refers to several examples of work discussed as feminist work from North America and Europe. Through reference to these works and the questions raised in relation to them I want to challenge the
conception of contemporary feminism in North America and Europe. The works chosen as examples are neither a comprehensive nor a truly international selection since many continents of the world are not represented by this discussion or this forum. I’ve picked women who are very much in the mainstream in the gallery system in the art market of North America and Europe to raise the point that this frequently Eurocentric view is what is readily identified as a spurious internationalism - in so far as it is an exchange between nations.

How can we discuss an internationalism in feminism? Given that many of us would not readily subscribe to an internationalism based on the Eurocentric view above - in terms of any exchange between 1st world nation states - or another model of international exchange, which forces consideration of nationality through crude stereotypes or character traits from different national identities and how these supposedly distinct identities might meet. In the artworld, this type of exchange regularly takes place primarily in government sponsored international forums and art fairs like Biennales or in festivals and exhibitions organised in major museums. The idea of ‘internationalism’ in the art world is premised on institutional meetings through biennales. Period and nationality still act as dominant classifications in terms of the presentation and curation of exhibitions within this context. One cannot simply dismiss this or pull it apart, since this is the major organising framework in which artists become subjects of such discourses as aesthetics. Most feminists remain extremely critical of the operations of such institutions in terms of their exclusions and selections but so also do many critics of the Eurocentrism within such a system, based as it is on privileging certain trade routes or cementing political exchanges between nation states.

As someone who positions herself as a feminist art critic, I would like to try in my writing to find categories, correspondences or relationships in discussing the work of women artists which may cut across this situation while problematising the structures which maintain it. One cannot escape from the fact that one is dealing with a question of power, of vested economic interests in the artworld, in business and in political life. The temporary illusion one may have that one is free to write on any subject, to draw connections as one pleases, is never so simple given the embedded nature of scholarship, of canons and critical/aesthetic models in which one has of necessity to position oneself in order to be heard. I say this to highlight the limits of intelligibility within certain discussion not just the restraints one experiences in making connections between ideas, artworks, people, places.

Feminist criticism has had much to say on the inherent biases within scholarship which prejudice women, but as women we also have to be aware of the limits within the models we borrow, the ideas we use and the limits of the discourse we may want to initiate given the subjects we focus on, the audiences we strive to find. In this sense, one does not have the 'freedom' to position artworks within a field of autonomous aesthetised objects that one can simply rearrange at random in free-
floating aesthetic dialogues. Constantly one must be alert to the relations of power which may present to one a chosen subject or topic as of interest and the limits of the discourse with which one speaks or tries to speak about that subject. In the art market, a differential structure amongst artists is formed along many axis: those of maturity, of market stature, market value, of the success of the last exhibition; of the way certain types of images or ideas have a fashionable currency. This is another dimension to the politics of representation in terms of who gets elected for retrospectives, how many one-person shows are organised across different national capitals, at what age someone has their first retrospective. It is necessary to refer back to these axis of power whoever one is discussing. In international biennales, one comparison lies between the representation of women and the representation of men, but such axis of power also operate across other axis as the under-representation of Hungary or the Pacific rim.

If feminism, as Hilary Robinson has just suggested, is centred in the aesthetic mediation of lived experience then the question of how feminists continue to talk of the personal as political is always a question of ethics combined with aesthetics. Feminism has placed great stress on its role as intervening through critique to change assumptions, stereotypes of femininity, of the roles of men and women.

To most men the castrating side of feminism - man-bashing aggressive women - might be represented by two very different images. Diane Dimassa's *HotHead Paisan, Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* cartoons/poster images offer a humorous and biting look at stereotypical dilemmas and blatant prejudices of living in a homophobic world. In Valie Export's action *Genitalpanik* Export cut the crotch from her unisex jeans and paraded / and posed with a machine gun. These two images neatly contrast one set of shifts between the 1970s and the 1990s. Diane Dimassa's ironic cartoon, her use of zine and poster-type formats, invokes the lesbian terrorist as the nineties figure of resistance – a Bad Girl. Valie Export's work is a seventies performance documented as a photograph. In the performance, she invokes quite different ideas of classic guerilla tactics of the late sixties derived from Che Guevara or Baader-Meinhof. The shock value is the contradiction of guerilla=woman, jeans revealing not masking the sex of the wearer a unisex. (Unisex jeans a typically 1970s term).

This example raises one of the pressing questions of feminism which generation of women - and whose cultural experiences within feminism - is one considering. There is an increasing need to be more specific, to particularise, to recognise generational differences as central to contemporary feminist debate. In another image by an Austrian artist, Eva Grubinger, a photo-type poster called *Hit* features a mock girl band standing in grunge-type 1970s revival gear. Such an image may signify a kind of in-your-face everything is possible now but it remains caught by the language of the popular media and the illusion that everything in identity is subject to repackaging and ultimately marketable. In typical images of bands in
pop consumer culture, these girls are adopting the position usually reserved for the male bands, mimicking their snarling expression and posing. Does mimicking always carry with it the potential for critique or does it reproduce more of the same? How different from the real success stories of women in the music industry, like The Spice Girls and the way they are packaged, dressed, marketed and sold as different models of individualised sexiness.

Acquiring armour - in the sense of a dress-code or style-conscious avantgarde appearance - and armour against other people's view of the self may serve as an internal defense mechanism but when is this just a fashion and when is it critique. Representation as self-portraiture is a dominant subject in many women artist's work. New dress codes and new 'identities' emerge all the time in the cycles of style and fashion. Where is the feminist critical moment in their production as opposed to the constant cycle of the feminine? Those private rehearsals in front of the mirror where one seeks to model oneself on another's identity - pose as one's idols, have not gone away. But does the manipulation or presentation of these performances necessarily reveal any critical distance?

Jo Spence's work offers a very different model of another kind of Guerrila tactic for feminism. The series of her work which is most relevant here is Cultural Sniper. The work is made from a phototherapy session exploring feelings and attitudes towards class differences in how people view you, and how you both internalise and externalise class difference. Phototherapy is itself a form of therapy with photography developed with Rosy Martin by Jo Spence - would such originality provide a claim for its precedence as art? (another question from aesthetics). (and similarly - what weight would this then have on evaluating it / classifying it as art or therapy?) These powerful photographs of a woman putting on war paint (not make-up), as she writes out in large pen on the studio backdrop a literal rehearsal of past memories in relation to attitudes, traumas, phrases spoken and their implications in her reactions. In this series, Cultural Sniper, Spence examines her own reactions to the internalisations and externalisations of class difference. Her external appearance - naked and daubed with paint, wearing a terrorist style balaclava - becomes a way to mark, project, and examine conflicts and emotions which are fundamental to the formation of a social identity - in this case, the transition for working-class background to middle-class life status as a mature university-educated artist - it is not merely the adoption of a dress code to style the self.

These first four crude stereotypes from feminist work spanning the last twenty years, lead to a fundamental problem with canons within aesthetic scholarship (in so far as it claims to generalise about perceptions of artworks. The problem lies in how do transform a culture where women artists continue to be rendered as absent? Here again are two very different strategies within feminist work: Lyn Malcolm in 1985 made a piece called Why have there been So Few Great Women Artists? - taking its lead from Linda Nochlin's 1971 essay 'Why have there been no Great Women
Artists?’. The piece is an installation of a corner of a room with a table laid out with tea things. All the stereotypical signs of civilised, middle-class, bourgeois femininity are present Laura Ashley wallpaper, an embroidery hanging in a glass frame, a tablecloth, crocheted knickknacks, the cooking of sweet cakes, but the work asks a troubling question while pointing to an answer in this context. The energy, devotion and excess lavished on the domestic environment is suggested by the work itself as why women do not achieve ‘greatness’ as artists. The work was shown as part of an exhibition of contemporary women's art practice using textiles called The Subversive Stitch, developing the thesis advanced by Rosika Parker's book of the same name. In The Subversive Stitch Rosika Parker draws attention to the messages about the bind of femininity which reinforces the separation of creativity between public and private, between conforming to models of feminine achievement and the limited scope for transgressing them.

A contrasting strategy to this given women's position in art history as separate and Other, lies in attending not to the absence of women because of their devotion to duty but in presenting evidence of the presence of professional women artists in another kind of devoted duty: the archive. A travelling exhibit in Germany developed because of a protest at the absence of women at the last Documenta in Kassel curated by Jan Hoet is a good example of this. The project called 'Informationsdienst' / Information Service was produced by Ute Meta Bauer, Tina Geissler and Sandra Hastenteufel and contains file upon file of information, catalogues, press cuttings on women who Jan Hoet might have selected for Documenta 9 (1992). But then, as Sabeth Buchmann suggests there remains the troubling question, when it is not hard to accumulate more and more information on women and their work, to prove visibly and repeatedly that women are not absent, just routinely ignored and devalued, how do you change a culture in which women disappear? (see Sabeth Buchmann 'Information Service: InforWork' October 71, Winter 1995). How do you provide not just more facts, but better interpretative models whereby women's exclusion as example is not automatic, routine, a matter of thoughtlessness?

The attempt at recovery can equally be problematic:

The American group, Stuveysant, a collective brand name for a group of women's practice is premised on a strategy of feminist re-appropriation. In one work, they take back the American artist Robert Gober's work, his use of installation with repeated wall-paper and props, stealing back the appropriations by men of women's creativity. Repreating his vaginas and phalli wallpaper and positioning a copy of an immaculate white bride's dress from another of Gober's work they try to over-emphasise the stereotyping of femininity in his work.

Hearing women's voices, recognising women's memories as of value, as worthy of consideration lies behind women artists frequent advocacy of collective and participatory artworks. Suzanne Lacy's The Crystal Quilt, a performance involving many older women, in a shopping mall where the performers are ritually dressed
and the performance staged on a dramatic setting of cloths and carpets laid out in the manner of a quilt is premised on a sharing of collective memory between women and audience.

Perhaps, we need more than facts, more than tributes, more than celebration, greater attention to reasons behind the limited arguments raised against women. Maybe it's just a naive hope to see a possibility beyond the presentation of women's position to means out of the traps in which we are caught. Maybe, my version of a feminist critical consciousness has to do with demonstrating what other aspect is being shown of women's lives, of the dilemmas within constructions of femininity. With so much work circulating on consumer commodity culture in European and North American galleries, the question still remains about how a subject, idea or issue tackled, which is, is this endorsement or critique? Is a politics of consumption critiqued by the American artist Sylvie Fleury's twee video Twinkle where one sees a woman, like Marie Antoinette, masquerading, adopting different identities by the trying on of different shoes.

To show the contrast I would point to an example of earlier feminist work where the critical element was central to the analysis advanced in the women's liberation movement. In one of Alexis Hunter's photo-text pieces Approach to Fear VII-XIII: Pain-Solace: Pain-Destruction of Cause a silver platform shoe - the origin of pain in calloused and bruised feet is ritually removed and burnt as one scans the sequence of photographs laid out as in a film clip. This trapping of femininity is no longer enough to secure a reasonable life.

The same question in a different formulation also applies to the next example; do these works represent critique of social relations or do they merely present them? In Gillian Wearing video installation Talking Heads the viewer hears and looks at a line of TV screens on which are filmed different people singing their favourite songs. No one sings well, but it is clear that personal appreciation rather than performance is the key as to why they have been selected. The viewer hears individual voices drowned by the multiple cacophony of sounds which are not so much choreographed as randomly produced. No one's personal favourite is the same, no one hears another person's version as adequate or complete. As individuals' they remain locked within their own individual view of the world. But it's a nice idea, if one there were communication between people or is one's own subjectivity the only paramount thing in the world!?!?

In a considerably more complex work, Vera Frenkel's Transit Bar, also viewable in a different form on the web, which has been shown in several galleries after the last Documenta 9(1992) where it was first produced, the same questions arise but very different answers are reached. The viewer enters what is to all intents and purposes, a working bar installed within the gallery space, with carefully placed TV screens and newspapers to read. The artist is occasionally present as one of the bartenders who serve the audience drinks. The assumption that this work might
not be made by a woman in her fifties who is serving you drinks is part and parcel of
the piece's slow and steady unsettling of what one accepts as normative in the context
of a bar - albeit that its still a bar in an art gallery. As one slowly acquaints oneself
with the room, orders a drink, choses a newspaper to peruse, starts to watch the
fragmented talking heads on the TV screens, one starts to realise that it is only
partially familiar. The text of translations flickering on and off the screens are both
familiar and then unfamiliar. In closer examination - do all artworks get this kind
of attention - one discovers - as discovery is one mechanism for enjoying a work of
art - that the people are speaking in Yiddish, the text is translated into German,
English and French. The papers are from the different language communities
available locally and are not a typical cross-section of the national daily papers. The
piece points to the misunderstandings of translation form of cultural exchange.
fragmentation of knowledge about the experiences of migration.

The last two contrast examples refer the debate back to the female body but one
still has to address the mass communications industry in the spread of pornography.
Annie Sprinkle's Anatomy of a Pinup analyses through an instruction map of ideal
poses gestures, practices, scribbled over herself dressed as the stereotypical pinup
photograph in the sex industry. Such works reveal Sprinkles' work around the
pornography industry's adherence to coding the women's body as pronographic
subject. Its appearance as a critique is underscored by her use of autobiography to
announce her role - the personal as political, perhaps the credo of contemporary
feminism. In this respect it fits many ideas from 1970s feminist thought.

However if one looks at Carolee Schneemann's work of the late 1960s and early
seventies and a piece like Interior Scroll - represented now only through a photograph
from the performance - one might see a deeper challenge to this illusion that at one
level there existed continuity between early feminist work and Bad Girl type work
today. Schneemann's performance involved the artist naked, pulling from a scroll
from her vagina. As she did so, she read a text, a fictional dialogue between a
structuralist film-maker and a woman artist as they discuss processes for making
work. The structuralist film-maker tries to persuade the woman artist to adopt his
own method of working, to become rational, systematic, to attend to structures
which frame thought. The woman insists on the validity of her own perspective,
the contradictions, the conflicting emotions and striving to find her own voice.

I chose these examples above to play on differences in attitudes and perceptions
towards feminism in the visual arts. I was aiming to destabilise the notion that
feminism in the visual arts is one kind of practice - a type of work, an attention to
media, and to reveal some idea and questions which women artists are exploring
and highlight their relationship to broader ideas in feminist theory. I wanted to raise
some specific examples from practice to point to the difficulty of trying to generalise
about international perspectives within feminism and art. There remain overloaded
associations and connotations with the word feminism but the word covers the
actual plurality of ideas feminism encompasses. It remains necessary to speak of feminism within and across practices just as it is also necessary to recognise different approaches to feminist ideas in different nation-states around the world. This is not to ally feminism with nationalism’s but it is necessary to recognise that there are differences in perception of what the stakes are for feminism and the different historical circumstances in which those distinctions emerge. In this respect, I want to clarify that I am trying to point to distinctions in modes of thought, which increasingly are not simply geographical but to do with intellectual resources and exchange of ideas which characterise different communities - if women artists can actually be said to represent a community - and their conflicting models of interpretation vis-a-vis some questions in aesthetics.

To follow up references, please consult n.paradoxa’s booklist.

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