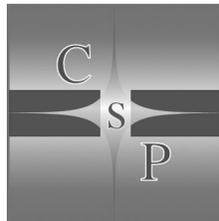


Feminism Reframed

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Edited by

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INTRODUCTION

LOOKING ON, BOUNCING BACK

ALEXANDRA M. KOKOLI

Feminism Reframed: Reflections on Art and Difference addresses the ongoing dialogue between feminism, art history and visual culture from contemporary scholarly perspectives. Over the past thirty years, the critical interventions of feminist art historians in the academy, the press and the art world have not only politicised and transformed the themes, methods and conceptual tools of art history, but have also contributed to the emergence of new interdisciplinary areas of investigation, including notably that of visual culture. Although the impact of such fruitful transformations is indisputable, their exact contribution to contemporary scholarship and their changing function within the academy remains a matter for debate, not least because feminism itself has changed significantly since the Women's Liberation Movement. Side-stepping facile, vague and/or ideologically suspect formulations like "post-feminism", this collection targets the relationships between past and present as well as among different strands of thought; it aims to offer a complex re-evaluation of different strands in feminist thought and practice around art and visual culture since the 1970s, highlighting continuities as well as points of disjunction. The essays in this volume, all previously unpublished, engage with the interpretative and conceptual models fashioned by feminist art history and visual cultural criticism from both historical and theoretical perspectives. The authors, most of whom are early career academics and emergent practising artists, explore the gaps and omissions of established methodologies and prevalent art historical narratives, while also recovering valuable tools and insights that may be redeployed in contemporary contexts and put to new uses. Inspired by the one-day conference *Difference Reframed: Reflections on the Legacies of Feminist Art History and Visual Culture* (16 September 2006, University

of Sussex),¹ this is a purposeful selection of considered responses to what the authors view as timely and pressing questions, including: What is the relevance of feminist art history to contemporary scholarship, curating, and art practice? If feminism itself works through/as revision, should second-wave strategies and concerns be further (or newly) revised? What has been the influence of feminist theory—and practice—on key notions like spectatorship, subjectivity, and performativity? Does theory have a history (and vice versa)? What forms do/can feminist politics and practice take?

Trouble: Feminism and/as Risk-taking

Feminism Reframed reviews and revises existing feminist art histories but also reasserts the need for continuous feminist interventions in the academy, the art world and beyond. The present book is therefore caught up in its own internal differences and differentiations, if it is not indeed split: it is simultaneously homage and critique; it builds on the long, varied and widely divergent traditions of feminist interventions and revisions, while making such traditions the object of critical analysis and evaluation. As its title suggests, *Feminism Reframed* situates itself as an assortment of feminist (or at the very least feminism-inspired) approaches to feminism itself.² The title also deliberately—and somewhat arrogantly—evokes another collection, whose decisive impact on the practice and meaning of feminist art history is beyond doubt: *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement, 1970-1985*, edited by Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock contains a valuable selection of documents on (and constituting an intrinsic part of) feminist interventions in art and visual culture, reproduced in facsimile, thus granting the reader a glimpse of the original aesthetic of the often short-lived, underground publications in which they made their first appearance.³ *Framing*

¹ Not all authors were also speakers: the contributions of Lauritis, Swartz and Tate did not stem from that conference.

² Pollock, “The Politics of Theory”, 4 and n. 3. Pollock here refers to teaching, but has been putting to practice just such a self-reflective approach in her writing as well, at least since the late 1980s.

³ Some previously unpublished material is also included. The editors’ decision not to typeset the collected texts anew seems even more justified in retrospect and certainly makes up for the poor quality of illustrations and sometimes script, which is exacerbated in the reproduction by facsimile. The original publications have now become very difficult to get hold of, as most of the key archives of the WLM in the UK receive little or no public funding and have consequently had to

Feminism does not simply bring together writings by art historians, art critics, artists, curators and activists, but crucially blurs the boundaries between such occupations or designations. The editors' introduction, albeit chronologically organised, presents an image of intersecting and overlapping relationships, interests, practices and debates too complex for any linear narrative to contain.

The centrality of *Framing Feminism* for developing feminist art historians in the UK, but also for anyone with an interest in British feminist art or radical art history in general, cannot be overstated. For me and many of my colleagues, *Framing Feminism* has been a constant point of reference and inspiration in our attempts to get to grips with the surge of activity, activism and scholarship in the 1970s and 1980s that has come to shape the terrain of academic feminism in the visual arts ever since. The book is unique for the immediacy with which it presents original documentation, as noted above, which it “frames” by a double introduction, a general one by both editors and Pollock's article “Feminism and Modernism”. While the former starts off as a historical account of various initiatives and their interconnections, it evolves into a theoretical discussion of the different strategies of feminist art and their sometimes tense relationship with the broader political agendas of the movement. This relationship, often translated into a division between textual strategies and emancipatory practices, needs to be mitigated, maintained and explored, and is interestingly conceptualised as a kind of dialectic:

There is [...] a dialectic to be maintained within feminist art practices between the democratic and enabling activities which encourage more women to make art and exhibit it with confidence simply as women, and the specialised, theoretically developed feminist interventions in the official cultural sites and apparatuses. It should not be a matter of either/or, alternative interventionism, populism or the mainstream. The history of the feminist art movement, and the theory which can now be elaborated for it, reveals a necessary relation and interchange between practical strategies and strategic practices.⁴

“Feminism and Modernism” picks up where the introduction leaves off by attempting a definition of “feminist art”, to conclude—controversially, at least at the time—that the feminist character of an artwork is not a matter

downsize, merge together or, in the best case scenario (that however raises its own problems), donate their collections to larger academic and public libraries.

⁴ Parker and Pollock, “Fifteen years of feminist action”, 75

of the gender (woman) or political identity (feminist) of its maker, but of *effect*: an artwork is feminist (or not) depending on “the way [it] acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers” and whether “it subverts the normal ways in which we view art and usually seduced into a complicity with the meanings of the dominant and oppressive culture.”⁵ A wide variety of artwork is examined closely in the text to throw into relief the “crucial difference”⁶ between art by feminists and feminist art, a difference between terms whose boundaries are historically fluid, but which is still bound to raise disagreements. What is more, Pollock recognises that “not all feminist practices contend with [the] dominant discourses and institutions [of modernism] in the manner discussed in this section.”⁷

An awareness of the imminent danger of causing conflict or displeasure and of the inevitability of doing so inflects much of *Framing Feminism*. At least this is the impression that I am left with after reading it again in preparation for writing this introduction. The editors admit that in their effort to “reconstruct some of the context in which feminist interventions have functioned”,⁸ they have consciously de-emphasised the contribution of individual artists: “This may well be read as a *betrayal* by individual women—as a refusal to provide the kind of critical endorsement which they genuinely need and deserve.”⁹ Although not noted in the preface, the editors’ choice must also have been necessitated by their dismissal of monographic art historical approaches and their inherently gendered exaltation of individual, individuality and individualism. What is more, some (albeit a minority) of the artists in question have since met with the critical endorsement that they unquestionably deserve, at least to a degree. Regardless of the overwhelmingly favourable evaluation of such editorial choices by most contemporary readers, however, there are many indications, including and beyond those just cited, that Parker and Pollock foresaw the repercussions of *framing* feminism. Offering up a history—and simultaneously a theory—of art and feminism, feminism in art, and “feminist art” has the significant side-effect of laying the editors, their work and subject matter open to scrutiny and criticism: it paints them into corners that may not have been actively chosen, but which are the perceived consequence of

⁵ Pollock, “Feminism and Modernism”, 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁸ Parker and Pollock, “Preface”, *Feminism Reframed*, xiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, emphasis added. I am correcting the original “woman” to “women”, considering it a typographical error.

specific choices. Various events and reviews following the publication of *Framing Feminism* highlight this other meaning of framing, and expose its troubling implications.¹⁰ As in Poe's Purloined Letter, the clue is in plain view, in the title and on the cover,¹¹ for all to see and yet, more often than not, miss.

While the title of this collection evokes *Framing Feminism*, this introduction, entitled "Looking On, Bouncing Back", deliberately alludes to another significant volume edited by Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On: Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, published twenty years ago in 1987, at the same time and by the same publisher as *Framing Feminism*. *Looking On* anthologises debates around the representation of women and femininity in visual art and culture in which feminist analysis had played a pivotal role. Betterton deliberately brings together the high and the low, advertising, pornography, "fine art" and feminist art, to highlight how different areas of cultural production and genres "overlap and intersect in their representations of femininity and feminine sexuality."¹² On the cover of the book Laura Knight's *Self Portrait* (1913) is reproduced, showing the artist in the act of painting a female nude in her studio, with the slender body of the naked model (artist Ella Louise Naper, née Champion) dominating the right half of the frame and sketchily repeated on the artist's canvas on the left. The negative tinge of the title—*looking on* passively, with no prospect of interacting or reacting—is elaborated through Betterton's original misreading of this work:

Failing to notice the brush in the artist's right hand, I thought I was seeing a woman looking through the window of a gallery or shop. This mistake seems to me to be revealing of certain cultural assumptions about femininity. While the woman's narcissistic glance in a mirror or a shop window is socially legitimated, her critical or investigative gaze is not.¹³

¹⁰ Such as the discussion at the ICA, London, 21 January 1988, between Lubaina Himid and Griselda Pollock. See Clare Rendell's review of the discussion and the book published in the *W.A.S.L. Journal*.

¹¹ About the cover of *Framing Feminism* see my chapter "Feminism and the Stories of Feminist Art" in this volume.

¹² Betterton, "Introduction: Feminism, Femininity and Representation", 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 4. Betterton proceeds to give a detailed re-interpretation of the painting, focusing on how the artist's sideways glance disrupts the voyeuristic visual perception of the female nude and, by extension, female beauty and feminine sexuality, in which the gaze adopted by the (male) viewer is normally complicit with that of the (male) artist.

Just as Knight's *Self Portrait*, upon closer—feminist—inspection, challenges this gendering of the gaze versus the cursive and/or narcissistic glance, the texts collected in *Looking On* and the debates of which they are representative examples have since succeeded in completely overhauling critical approaches to the visual representation of gender and sexuality and, to a substantial degree, have seeped into the “everyday practices of looking at, and making sense of”¹⁴ media imagery. Nevertheless, Betterton also observes that:

the kinds of pleasure offered to women by a variety of cultural forms are so deeply implicated in the way in which femininity is structured that they cannot easily be given up. [...] [I]f the task of feminist criticism is to unpick the threads which bind women and men to certain representations of femininity, can it also enable them to reconstruct and redefine that femininity in different and more positive terms?¹⁵

While Betterton's original misreading of Knight's subversive *Self Portrait* may seem strange to those of us who have been acquainted with the painting through and thanks to Betterton's feminist (re)interpretation, this last question seems even stranger due to its familiarity. The combination of its continued relevance and changed meaning is troubling: if in 1987 the question mark stood for hesitant hope, in 2007 it reads more like doubt.

Feminism Reframed is marked by the prefix “re-” of repetition, return and re-engagement. It is framed by the fullness of this twenty-year lag, by measures of distance and proximity, successes, failures and persistent questions that are continually recycled and, in the present context, welcomed back. Traces of self-reflection, apprehension and ambivalence have deliberately been chosen to introduce this collection, as a reminder that to frame feminism is always a risky business, likely to make trouble, not least for feminism itself. In the hope that at least some of that trouble will be productive, feminism is here once more reframed.

Strife: Between Difference and Divergence

Cornelia Butler, curator of the exhibition *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 4 March-16

¹⁴ Ibid., 16.

¹⁵ Ibid., 14.

July),¹⁶ admits in her introduction to the catalogue to being initially “surprised at the [...] eclecticism” of the essays she commissioned: “I concluded that something about the subject of feminist art inspires a healthy sense of expansiveness, resistance, and subversion”.¹⁷ Feminist art history does not seem to be much different. I have not only been surprised by the eclecticism of the commissioned chapters but also by their greatly divergent perspectives, and their politico-aesthetic variety that verges on fundamental differences of opinion. Crucially, not all authors describe themselves as feminist practitioners, whether their practice is fine art, critical writing or both, while even those who do have sometimes significantly different understandings of what it means to be “feminist”. Involving non-feminist contributors has not been an easy decision but one about which I have come to feel strongly. It is very important that non-feminist responses to feminism are accommodated and, indeed, highlighted in present and future considerations and evaluations of feminism in the arts. Firstly, although the danger of ghettoising feminist activity isn’t perhaps as prominent as in the past, it is still important to foreground the multiple links and wide-ranging influence of feminist cultural input well beyond “the converted”. What is more, feminist critique has rarely limited itself to the work of feminists or even women but took the whole of culture, with all its patriarchal biases, as its object of analysis and target for change. The very nature of feminist intervention is dynamic and expansive: it either brings on a radical reshuffling of social and semiotic systems on the whole, or it is ineffective. In an interview with Rozsika Parker, Susan Hiller instructively relates an episode from a faculty meeting at an art school where she taught in the seventies:

A male member of staff [...] said he totally agreed with everything I said, he thought we should have at least 50% women teaching at the college and ended up by saying “Of course that would mean the end of art education as we know it.” He’s absolutely right.¹⁸

¹⁶ A few of the contributors mention this exhibition and Lauritis discusses it in some length, so I will not expand on it here. At the time of writing, *WACK!* is touring across the United States.

¹⁷ Butler, “Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria”, in Mark, *WACK!*, 23.

¹⁸ “Dedicated to the unknown artist”, *Framing Feminism*, 283. This excerpt is also cited in the editors’ “Preface” to make the same point. An abridged version of this interview is reprinted in *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller* (26-30), but the discussion about feminism’s remit and range has been edited out.

Finally, I would also like to suggest that, especially since feminism has demonstrably had such a great impact on the practice, history and theory of art, it is not (or no longer) only self-avowed feminists who have a right—or, indeed, a legitimate stake—in exploring and interrogating feminist legacies. After all, feminism does not wholly or exclusively belong to feminists, although whether a profound and earnest engagement with feminism by “non-feminists” could ever leave them unaltered is a different matter.

There is another strategic reason why contributions by non-feminists have been included, that became clear to me after visiting the *WACK!* show. Curator Cornelia Butler’s ambition is stated as follows:

to make the case that feminism’s impact on art of the 1970s constitutes the most influential international “movement” of any during the postwar period—in spite or perhaps because of the fact that it seldom cohered, formally or critically, into a movement the way Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, or even Fluxus did.¹⁹

It would certainly have been impractical, although perhaps not unreasonable, to expect to see some concrete examples of feminism’s influence, i.e. art that has absolutely no feminist affiliations politically yet displays clear signs of the impact of feminism and feminist art, if not at the exhibition at least in the accompanying catalogue. Even though the variety of work on show was impressive or, according to some, excessive, it was all offered up under the auspices of (a) feminism, even in the case of artists like Marina Abramovic, who has persistently denied any connection to feminism as a movement.²⁰ As the reader will have noticed, the distinctions that I am attempting to draw are already deeply problematic: what is after all political and what is aesthetic? Should work by artists who claim to not be feminist be excluded, even if it interrogates gender and sexuality? But, I would argue, this is the outcome of thinking through Butler’s claim about feminism’s influence. If feminism as a movement has always been so multi-faceted and frayed around the edges, how is one to determine what constitutes feminist art and what feminism-influenced art? Suspending these conceptual concerns, a likely defence of *WACK!* would be that it is up to the spectator to figure out where feminism’s influence lies, relying on her own art historical knowledge.

¹⁹ Butler, 15.

²⁰ This is admittedly acknowledged in the catalogue, 210. Butler chose on the basis of feminist qualities in the work and not the artists, which is a generally accepted practice and conceptually justified. Still, this show was of *feminist* art exclusively.

Nevertheless, the success of such an exercise would reveal more about the spectator's sympathies than her knowledge. If feminism has so much internal variation, its intertextual connections to its successors would in theory be inexhaustible. If (almost) anything can be feminist, (almost) nothing is. Strangely enough, I do not disagree with the proposition that feminist art theory and practice have perhaps been the most influential in the post-war period. But a show (or a book, an institution, etc.) that is wholly "feminist" could never possibly prove the point that feminism has been influential. This is precisely why authors who do not identify as feminist have been included in this volume. In *Feminism Reframed*, the contributors are not holding on to—or, worse, reviving—divisive distinctions between what/who is feminist and what/who is not for the sake of division, or for lack of awareness of the dangerous role such acts of labelling can play in terms of power. But difference must be tolerated at all costs and, if possible, valued, nurtured and explored. Self-designation isn't taken at face value, since no statement articulated in language ever is, but it is still acknowledged and respected.

The concept and experience of difference is at the centre of the present investigation in more ways than one. Anyone involved in feminist critical practice broadly defined is confronted by at least two sets of differences and, additionally, at least two disparate definitions of "difference". On the one hand, *feminist* approaches to art practice, history and theory as well as the expansive field of visual culture are inherently opposed to (or at the very least weighed against) non-feminist approaches, namely those that have either been resistant to the challenges of feminism's introduction of new objects and methods and its revisions of old ones, or that claim to have already surpassed them.²¹ This difference is adversarial and for the most part non-dialectic in its rigidity. On the other, there are the important differences "among us": the internal variation and diversity accommodated (or at least contained) within the history of second-wave feminism is well known to anyone familiar with the history of second-

²¹ The former constituency (i.e. those resistant to feminism) represents staunchly unreformed art history as it is still practiced in many educational institutions around the world, and as it is still propagated by numerous art historical publications for some academic but mostly professional and amateur audiences. The latter constituency, which claims to be beyond—and thus over—feminism, stands for "post-feminist" tendencies in their neo-conservative manifestations. Some have persuasively argued that "post-feminism" itself is a neo-conservative phenomenon. See e.g. Jones, "'Post-feminism': A Remasculinization of Culture" and also the inaugural issue of the important feminist journal *n.paradoxa*, edited by Katy Deepwell, no. 1: Feminism/Post-feminism (January 1998).

wave feminism and its aftermath. These differences are almost always informed by multiple theorisations of “difference”, influenced substantially though not exclusively by poststructuralist re-readings of Freud by Lacan and others.²² Indeed, the very conceptualisation of so-called “sexual difference” came to be used as a virtual litmus test by which feminist factions were defined and through which they surveyed their boundaries and asserted their remits.²³ The debates around “sexual difference” have now seemingly been replaced by other significant differences mostly among “generations and geographies”, to evoke the influential collection of the same name, that is to say the histories of questions of difference and issues of cultural difference—“the specificity of location which is cultural and social as well as political”.²⁴

Feminism Reframed takes on generations more directly than geographies, although ultimately the two are more often than not intertwined. The 2006 conference *Difference Reframed* was originally conceived as a platform for a productive intergenerational dialogue between established and emerging scholars and artists. As Griselda Pollock has often noted herself, however, “generation” should not be interpreted literally in this context: rather than chronological age, it stands for disparate, historically situated chains of investigation, theoretical convergences, personal and political alliances. All the same, issues of status and power should not be overlooked: our placement on one or the other side of real-life binaries like teachers and students, supervisors and supervisees, senior and junior academics, established and new artists, cannot but inform not only our relationships with one another but our understanding of what is at stake in art and feminism, and their reconsiderations.²⁵ As Catherine MacKinnon points out, the use of the

²² For a profoundly informed but also quite critical discussion of the impact of Lacan and his contemporaries, see Mitchell and Rose, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*. Feminism’s engagement with Lacan stands out for a number of reasons, not least for its fruitful irreverence, which jars favourably with the surprising orthodoxy of many contemporary Lacanians. See, for example, Grosz’s exemplary *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction*, and Gallop, *Reading Lacan*. For a Marxist feminist critique of “French Freuds”, see Clément’s *The Weary Sons of Freud*.

²³ Toril Moi’s writing is very useful in unpicking the workings of “difference” within the second-wave, even if it unavoidably gives a partisan picture of the debates: see “Feminist, Female, Feminine” and, of course, the landmark *Sexual/Textual Politics*.

²⁴ Pollock, “Preface”, *Generations and Geographies*, xii.

²⁵ Cf. Mignon Nixon on generational struggle and transference among women, 294.

term “difference” in reference to gender can seem misleadingly power-neutral, abstract and treacherously symmetrical.²⁶ Generational difference cannot be reduced to inequality as straight-forwardly as gender difference has (strategically) been, but it still partakes in structures of power that need to be recognised and submitted to feminist analysis.

As regards geographies, most of the articles collected here do not venture far beyond the “West”. This flies in the face of the increasingly prominent trend to reverse and diversify the unacknowledged (and thus universalising) emphasis of much feminist scholarship on Europe and America, as well as whiteness. This trend is both politically warranted and has often resulted in fascinating interdisciplinary bodies of work, drawing on and contributing to postcolonial theory in social, literary, and art historical scholarship, as well as art practice.²⁷ The value, both intellectual and political of such work is never in question—in fact, the discipline of art history today is already indebted to postcolonial theory—nor is the need to do more in this direction. Yet *Feminism Reframed* chooses to reframe feminism in a different way: instead of exploring forgotten and neglected ground, it returns to the established and (seemingly) familiar, to review and revise it, and make it strange again. The past is also a foreign land.²⁸

In her chapter for *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*, Griselda Pollock grapples with the question “what is feminism?”²⁹ Although it is her long personal/political engagement in and contribution to feminism and feminist art history that allows Pollock to undertake such

²⁶ MacKinnon, 8-9.

²⁷ Occasionally, however, the effort to replace Eurocentric historical narratives with “critical cartographies”, an example of which is Marsha Meskimmon’s contribution to the *WACK!* catalogue, and Peggy Phelan’s “Survey” in *Art and Feminism*, does not have as a politically challenging an outcome as one might hope. Drawing out “previously occluded affinities” among art, artists, and movements (Meskimmon, 326), without also uncovering pre-existing or establishing new links or coalitions in social, political and economic terms, these intellectual efforts are perhaps of more value to art history and criticism than they are to feminism or even postcolonial critique, and thus their contribution to *feminist* art history remains problematic to determine.

²⁸ For me so is the UK. One can only hope that “like being a foreigner, being a woman is a great advantage” (Hiller, “Susan Hiller in Conversation with Andrew Renton”, 99).

²⁹ Pollock, “The Politics of Theory”, 5ff. Although this is not the first publication of this text, its inclusion in *Generations and Geographies*, envisaged as a reflective renewal in the engagement of artists and art historians in the politics of feminism (xii), re-defines “The Politics of Theory” by placing it in this ambitious context.

a daunting enquiry, she also suggests, I think, that to at least pose this difficult question is the duty of any feminist intervention in art, theory, history, particularly in this period of “maturity”, when the fraught and fertile relationship between feminism and the visual arts already has a long and richly documented history of its own. To—at least implicitly—ask “what is feminism?” is perhaps not only a duty but an inevitability for any contemporary intervention that acknowledges its past. Interestingly, Pollock contrasts the question “what is feminism?” to the more often posed and facile “are you a feminist?”, a question that has not been avoided in this book. Both questions seem to me equally difficult to answer, and equally important to ask. The recent history of feminist scholarship is replete with definitions and re-definitions of what feminism is and what a feminist may be (the two overlap but don’t always coincide). The most attractive are usually vague and nearly impossible to contest. Yet, while in the late eighties and nineties such broad redefinitions seemed to offer the opportunity to non-hierarchically accommodate the wide variety of feminist interventions (or perhaps: the variety that always existed but was only acknowledged then), in the noughties feminism is paradoxically both too well-established and too easily marginalised to afford the equivocation and lack of commitment that such open-endedness implies.

I would take the chance to propose instead that feminism(s) today need much more concrete shared agendas rather than inclusive, umbrella formulations that are so designed that they can’t go wrong but are not always much help. These agendas have yet to emerge with any clarity, in either feminism or feminist art history:³⁰ *Feminism Reframed* falls short of putting forward any single unified or coherent agenda, although most of the contributions it brings together both advocate and themselves follow their own agendas, implicitly or explicitly. This is a collection of various, occasionally incommensurable proposals of what the work of feminist art history is, can or should be—or, in the case of the non-feminist contributions, an exposition of what feminist art history and theory have made possible, and of what has now (arguably) exceeded it. *Feminism Reframed* is by no means comprehensive, but partial and partisan, clearly “of its time”, and consequently vulnerable. It is its very partiality that qualifies it as a document of its time and place, its actual context and chosen contextualisations. Inspired by the one-day conference *Difference*

³⁰ This is obviously a matter for debate. I have already implied that postcolonial theorisations might prove to be the future for feminist scholarship. As for feminism as a movement, “third-wave feminism” seems to be a contender, but its agenda(s) and impact are yet to be decided.

Reframed, 16 September 2006, University of Sussex, this book constitutes a kind of historic document. Its usefulness exceeds that of the writings collected in it: it is also, perhaps principally, a snapshot of the impact of feminism on emergent art historical scholarship—or: a single frame in a film that is thankfully still rolling. *Feminism Reframed* may be deemed off the mark by some or, soon, “out of date”, which is to say that feminism will be considered in need of other or newer reframings. Paradoxically, this is among the aspirations of the book and its contributors. We can only hope that this volume helps fuel many more restorative reframings in the future.

Structure

Feminism Reframed has been divided into four sections that are neither chronological nor strictly thematic; the chapters collected under each one do not necessarily share a common methodology or subject matter, nor do they always converge in their approach to feminism, or art, or art history. Additionally, the four sections of the book do not appear to belong to the same order. All the same, the four sections have been so designed to hopefully help guide the reader through four distinct proposed emphases and modes of engagement with the expanded and shifting terrain of feminist art practice, history and theory: the work included under each section tends to conceptualise the task that feminism is faced with differently or, put another way, it tends to privilege different sets of issues, which represents deeper discrepancies than one might first assume. If, as well as a general resistance to the repression of difference through universalisms and universalisations of knowledge (and thus cultural, social and political practice), feminism also “demands that certain issues remain in view”,³¹ then the book proposes at least four different feminisms, although the engaged reader is bound to discover many more. So the present division is offered up with the awareness that the chapters of this volume could be reshuffled and reclassified into equally plausible categories, following different sets of criteria. Perhaps this is a task that the reader will happily (or automatically) undertake.

The first section, “On Exhibition(s): Institutions, Curatorship, Representation” is almost thematic, in so far as all three chapters spring from a feminist critique of recent art shows. Moreover, they also all depressingly affirm how limited feminism’s impact has been on curating—both in terms of exhibition programmes and approaches to

³¹ Pollock, “The Politics of Theory”, 5.

curating practices. Joanne Heath considers the gender politics of Frida Kahlo and Tamara de Lempicka's recent blockbuster exhibitions in London, concluding that the increased visibility of women artists should not necessarily be viewed as a feminist victory: the tension between the terms "woman" and "artist" persists and is troublingly exacerbated by curators and art critics alike. Ruth Hemus undertakes a close comparative reading of the installations of the major Dada retrospective (2005-2006) in Paris and New York, in which the women of Dada are marginalised equally albeit in slightly different ways. The current re-evaluation of the legacies of Dada is a great opportunity for much needed feminist revisions of its histories, Hemus argues. Alisia Chase deals with the clearly unreconstructed field of American comics, and calls for a return to "old school" feminist interventions in curating, critical writing, and art practice. Her critical discussion of the show *Masters of American Comics* and its coverage in the press culminates in a close reading of comics by women about women and womanhood, proving indeed that there are great women artists in the world of comics too.

The second section, "Between Absence and Performance: Rethinking the Subject", includes writing by two practicing artists, who return to the decreasingly popular question of subjectivity, approaching it from two very different angles. Artist and writer Karen Roulstone does not merely challenge the boundary between theory and practice, but eloquently demonstrates how painting can engage and collaborate with philosophy towards a rethinking of absence beyond polarised and hierarchical binaries and, crucially, beyond the metaphysics of presence, in the contestation of which feminism has undeniably a stake. Anthea Behm insightfully locates her *Chrissy Diaries*, a complex video and scriptovisual installation, in art historical and theoretical context: much more than an alter ego, the persona of Chrissy constitutes the vehicle through which gender stereotypes are explored and feminist theorisations of the visual are revisited.

Section III, "Reviews/Revisions" concentrates on art historical, including feminist art historical, assumptions in urgent need of reconsideration. 18th century scholar Jennifer Germann looks at portraits of two greatly influential women of the French court, Marie Leszczinska and Madame de Pompadour, and considers their unequal representation in contemporary academic writing: rather than attempting to merely redress the balance, Germann intriguingly recasts their complex relationship in feminist terms. Through a close reading of installation work by contemporary artist Anna Gaskell, Catherine Grant revises Laura Mulvey's theory of gendered spectatorship by reframing the discussion

around the structure of adolescence and sibling relations rather than the hierarchical polarity of sexual difference. Sue Tate presents a portion of her on-going research on the strangely neglected Pop artist Pauline Boty; Tate's emphasis is interestingly not on bringing Boty to the forefront, but on interrogating the reasons for her exclusion from feminist canons and exploring Boty's possible futures, as well as those of feminism in/and visual culture.

The links between the chapters of Section IV, "Between History and Theory", are more abstract. In my contribution, I revisit the concept of fetishism to examine how it is unexpectedly interwoven in the histories of feminist art and feminist art history. In doing so, I grapple with a series of false and yet operational divisions, such as that between emancipatory practices and textual strategies, evoked earlier in this introduction, and examine their transformations through time. Beth Anne Lauritis also confronts a false division, that between feminist (in the sense of identity politics) and conceptualist practice; her thoughtful interpretations of work by Susan Hiller and Annette Messager successfully deconstruct this distinction. Griselda Pollock critically addresses the recent surge of mainstream—and hegemonic—interest in feminism, concluding that, unfortunately, recognition has been largely tokenistic, and/or has come with suspect and damaging generalisations and misrepresentations. As an alternative to the distracting fanfare of symposia, blockbuster shows, and celebrations, Pollock proposes "the virtual feminist museum", a space in which previously unthought of encounters could take place. This "museum", she explains, is:

not a cyber museum but a concept which enables me to suggest the kind of journeys through the histories of art and image-making that we might need to undertake to assemble the lines of reference and affinity through which works by artists who are women might become more legible.

As well as demonstrating the deep interconnections between the practice of historiography and that of critical analysis, the three articles of this section target a variety of boundaries and partitions, previously considered sound, to make them permeable, or to suggest that they have always already been so.

It would seem forced for such a diverse—or rather divergent—collection to close with any single-authored conclusion. It was fortunate that Anne Swartz agreed to write a postscript about The Feminist Art Project, a research and discussion network for visual arts professionals launched in 2005. Symptomatic of the recent upsurge of interest in art and feminism and foreshadowing many of the events of 2007, The Feminist

Art Project provides a concrete and hopeful example for the possible futures of the practice of feminist art and art history in and beyond the academy.

Acknowledgements

Editing this book has been a most instructive and rewarding experience thanks to a series of fascinating exchanges through which drafts were finalised. I would therefore like to thank all the contributors not only for their thought-provoking chapters but also for being such willing and knowledgeable discussants of their own work as well as the wider questions and concerns that have driven this project. I am grateful to the anonymous and not so anonymous referees, especially Susan Hiller, for giving generously of their valuable time and expertise. I would also like to thank my editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Amanda Millar.

Although *Feminism Reframed* is clearly not a collection of conference papers, it wouldn't have materialised—at least not at this moment and surely not in this exact form—were it not for the conference that inspired it, *Difference Reframed: Reflections on the Legacies of Feminist Art History and Visual Culture*, University of Sussex, 16 September 2006. I would like to thank Nigel Llewellyn for planting the idea for such a research event and encouraging me to pursue it; Mick O'Malley for her invaluable advice on the practicalities of conference organisation and funding; the AHRC, the Graduate Research Centre for the Humanities, the School of Humanities, and the Department of Art History (University of Sussex), for their financial aid; and, naturally, Liz James, Head of the Department of Art History, for her unreserved endorsement of the conference and its inclusion in the departmental programme of research events. The success of *Difference Reframed* was as much down to the speakers' insightful contributions as its informed and engaged audience. I am particularly grateful for the enthusiastic involvement of Griselda Pollock and her unwavering backing of both the conference and this book. It is a privilege to have been offered some of her latest writing to include in this volume, especially as *Feminism Reframed* is a testament to her ongoing and truly shaping influence to that “oxymoron” of feminist art history.³²

³² Pollock refers to feminist art history as an oxymoron in *Difference Reframed*, 8, and has always treated the discipline of art history with the requisite caution, while working within it. This kind of internal paradox in and of feminist scholarship is one of its own most prominent motifs: see, for example, Cixous' concept of bodily white-on-white inscription (writing in breast milk) and the ambiguous “*voler*”,

Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the unflagging support of my father, Xenophon A. Kokolis, my family and friends, and especially Aaron Winter, for letting me rely on his expert assistance, encouragement and kindness.

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SECTION I:

**ON EXHIBITION(S): INSTITUTIONS,
CURATORSHIP, REPRESENTATION**

CHAPTER ONE

WOMEN ARTISTS, FEMINISM
AND THE MUSEUM:
BEYOND THE BLOCKBUSTER RETROSPECTIVE

JOANNE HEATH

Looking back over the past thirty-five years of feminist interventions in the fields of art, art criticism and art history, it would now seem that one of the most consistent aspects of that project has been to expose how the institutional structure of the art world has served to marginalise artists who are women. Much of the earliest activism in this respect focused on the issue of the under-representation or even exclusion of women artists from major museums and art galleries. In New York in 1970, groups including Women Artists in Revolution (WAR), Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL) and the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists picketed the Whitney Museum of American Art, demanding parity of representation in its annual shows of contemporary art.¹ In Britain, the Women's Workshop of the Artists' Union was formed in 1972 in order to campaign for equality in art education and in professional opportunities. Whilst their initial impetus was to foster alternative spaces for the display of art made by women, in 1975 protests were also organised outside the Arts Council and the Hayward Gallery intended to highlight discrimination against women in the realm of publicly funded exhibitions.²

¹ Women's Ad Hoc Committee/Women Artists in Revolution/WSABAL, "To the Viewing Public for the 1970 Whitney Annual Exhibition." On the history of North American feminist art activism, see also Broude & Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art*.

² These demonstrations were staged in response to the *Condition of Sculpture* exhibition organised by the Hayward Gallery in 1975, which had shown works by thirty-six men and only four women. In the face of such feminist demands for gender parity, a committee of five women was invited to organise the second Hayward Annual. For a detailed discussion of the debates occasioned by this 1978

As the ongoing campaigns of the Guerrilla Girls so clearly reveal, the omission of women artists from the official spaces of culture remains even today cause for concern. The Guerrilla Girls were formed in 1985 in order to address what they identified as a backlash against the initial gains made by women and artists of colour during the 1970s.³ Over the past twenty years, they have continued to shock and provoke with their witty posters underscoring the institutional sexism and racism so prevalent within the art world. It would now appear that the Guerrilla Girls themselves are in the paradoxical position of being embraced by the very institutions that they have so consistently critiqued: in 2005 they were invited to contribute to the Venice Biennale (their statistical analysis of the museums of Venice revealed that, out of the 1,238 artworks then on display, fewer than forty were by women),⁴ while from May 2006, a selection of their work will be on permanent display in the “States of Flux” wing of the newly re-hung Tate Modern. At the same time, however, an updated version of their famous poster *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met. Museum?* (Fig. 1-1) revealed that the number of women artists represented in the modern art sections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art had in fact declined from less than 5% in 1989 to less than 3% in 2005.

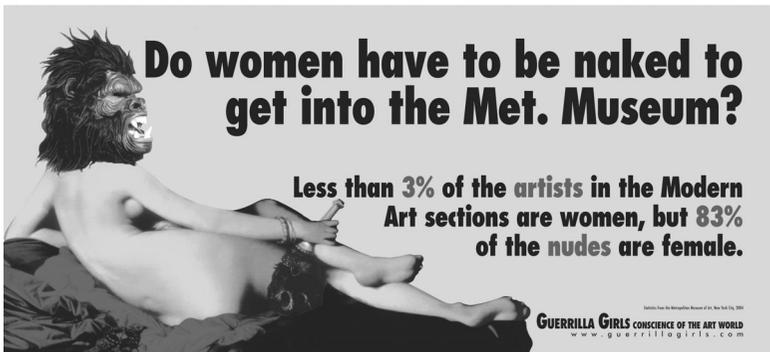


Fig. 1-1: The Guerrilla Girls, *Do Women Have to be Naked to get into the Met Museum?* (2005). Copyright by Guerrilla Girls, Inc., courtesy of www.guerrillagirls.com.

exhibition, which included the work of seven men and sixteen women, see Griselda Pollock, “Feminism, Femininity and the Hayward Annual Exhibition 1978.”

³ The Guerrilla Girls, “The Guerrilla Girls Bare All: An Interview.”

⁴ See <http://www.guerrillagirls.com/posters/venicewallb.shtml> (accessed 27 February 2007).

Over the past four years, visitors to London's most prominent public galleries have moreover had the singular opportunity of seeing major exhibitions of works by a number of significant twentieth-century artists who were women: Eva Hesse, curated by Elisabeth Sussman and Renate Petzinger, and installed at Tate Modern by Sheena Wagstaff in the winter of 2002-3; Gwen John (albeit shown jointly with her brother Augustus) in an exhibition at Tate Britain curated by David Fraser Jenkins and Chris Stephens in the autumn of 2004; in the summer of that year, Tamara de Lempicka, curated by Simonetta Fraquelli and Norman Rosenthal at the Royal Academy of Arts and, most recently, Frida Kahlo, curated by Emma Dexter and Tanya Barson at Tate Modern in the summer of 2005. This period has also witnessed a number of significant surveys of the work of contemporary practitioners, including Sam Taylor-Wood and Rebecca Horn at the Hayward Gallery, and Sarah Lucas at Tate Liverpool. With a major retrospective of the work of Louise Bourgeois also due to open at Tate Modern in October 2007, curatorial interest in the work of women artists shows no signs of abating.

Does this spate of blockbuster retrospectives therefore signal the belated acknowledgement of the early feminist demands for access to official spaces of display? Has feminism now achieved one of its ostensible aims—that of getting women artists into the museum? Do these exhibitions thus perhaps confirm the suspicions of those who now consider feminism to be a faintly outdated mode of analysis? Or are they in fact to be characterised by a near-total negation of feminism as a potential framework through which to read the work of women artists? In this essay, I want to explore some of the new issues that the museum's apparent embrace of women artists poses for feminist art history and theory, by looking in detail at the hang, catalogues and critical positioning of two of these recent exhibitions.

Women Artists and the Museum

Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon opened at the Royal Academy of Arts on 15 May 2004. The very title of the exhibition indicates a certain ambiguity: is Tamara de Lempicka herself an "Art Deco Icon", or is it rather her paintings that are to be considered iconic examples of the Art Deco style? The following summer, Tate Modern hosted a retrospective of the work of Frida Kahlo, an artist whose status as an icon is complexly overdetermined. In contrast to Tamara de Lempicka, who had received scant attention until the Royal Academy retrospective, Frida Kahlo may now be considered one of the world's most famous women artists. Over

the past twenty-five years, “Frida” has become a veritable cultural commodity, her image having been appropriated by the editors of both fashion and lifestyle magazines, as well as the manufacturers of innumerable kitsch objects.⁵ How, then, were her artworks packaged to appeal to a gallery-going audience whose appetite for all things Kahloesque had doubtless been further whetted by the release of the 2002 Hollywood biopic *Frida*, directed by Julie Taymor and starring Salma Hayek?⁶

The free guide produced to accompany the exhibition begins by posing the question, “Who was Frida Kahlo?”, and answers as follows: “51 years after her death, there are as many answers to the question as there are audiences to ask it. Kahlo is variously enshrined in the popular imagination as a bohemian artist, a victim turned survivor, proto-feminist, sexual adventurer who challenged gender boundaries, and, with her mixed-race parentage, an embodiment of a hybrid, postcolonial world.”⁷ Frida Kahlo’s complex social positioning and the multi-faceted discourse that has accrued her work is thus neatly condensed into a single sentence, and then as quickly disavowed in favour of more formalist concerns: the guide goes on to emphasise that, “first and foremost Frida Kahlo was a painter, and for this reason Tate Modern’s exhibition focuses upon the frank testimony of the paintings themselves.”⁸ The organisers of *Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon* appear to have shared a similar desire to

⁵ For an extensive analysis of Kahlo’s appropriation by popular culture, see Lindauer, *Devouring Frida*. The Tate Modern retrospective appears to have revived the popularity of the Kahlo look: one newspaper’s response to the exhibition suggested that, “Disturbing though her use of Surrealist imagery sometimes is—dead foetuses, ripped-out hearts—there is a visual contrast between the more gruesome details and the vividness of her indigenous attire; the unforgettable embroidery of a square-necked dress or an elaborately tassled shawl. Kahlo might have outwardly adopted a serious expression for the camera or her paintbrush, but her outfits capture what is truly desirable about this summer’s fashion influence: the colour, the detail, the free spirit.” “The trick, as ever, is to use her look as a starting point rather than adopting it too literally,” the article helpfully explained, “wear layers and experiment with clashes of texture and print. Above all, wear something because you’re struck by its beauty rather than worrying about whether everything matches. You can bet that’s what Frida would have done.” Asume, “Riding the Crest of the Mexican Wave.”

⁶ *Frida*, directed by Julie Taymor (Miramax, 2002). For a critical analysis of the film and the debates which it generated, see Bartra & Mraz, “Los Dos Fridas” and Molina Guzmán, “Mediating *Frida*.”

⁷ Burton, *Frida Kahlo*, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*

consider de Lempicka on her artistic merits and to allow her artworks to speak for themselves: their stated aim was to bring to public attention paintings “whose extraordinary artistic quality and originality have not been properly appreciated until now.”⁹ Their exhibition guide argues for de Lempicka’s inclusion in an expanded modernist canon: “Today we are more ready to look at and discuss the figurative and realist movements of the twentieth century. As younger generations take a fresh interest in artists who developed separately and independently from the official avant-garde, Tamara de Lempicka is gradually winning status in the postmodern world. It therefore seems an appropriate time for a comprehensive re-evaluation of this remarkable artist.”¹⁰

In accordance with their stated desire to uncover each artist’s hitherto overlooked contribution to the history of twentieth-century painting, both sets of curators followed the established conventions of the monographic retrospective and installed their exhibitions chronologically, thereby creating a seamless narrative of linear artistic development. The format of each exhibition was thus near identical: the visitor was initially steered through a series of smaller rooms containing early works, in which both artists were seen to have experimented with a number of different stylistic influences, before arriving at the main spectacle—those rooms in which they were seen to have established their own unique visual language. We were then hurried swiftly through a number of later artworks, before being disgorged directly into the inevitable gift shop, where we could purchase a variety of beads and bangles that had presumably been selected to help us emulate the look of our artistic heroines, or any number of mugs, magnets and postcards adorned with their image. In the case of the Kahlo exhibition, this broadly chronological survey of an artistic career was also organised thematically. This installation ensured that, for many reviewers, the undoubted highpoint of the exhibition was those rooms which grouped together the large-scale painting *The Two Fridas* (1939, Museo de Arte Moderno, Conaculta-Inba, Mexico) and a number of Kahlo’s other self-portraits. Whilst the accompanying catalogue tantalisingly promises that the exhibition would delineate “the momentous cultural and political milieu in which Frida Kahlo lived and worked, the key friendships that sustained her, and her passionate life-long engagement with her native Mexico,”¹¹ these concerns did not in fact translate into the visual space of the exhibition itself. Here, although “national identity” was conceded to be a significant concern within Kahlo’s work, it was bracketed off from her

⁹ Benesch, *Tamara de Lempicka: Art Deco Icon*, n.p.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Vicente Todoli, “Foreword” in *Frida Kahlo*, eds. Dexter & Barson, 7.