
Women who are artists / Artists who are women

Griselda Pollock



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Gonnard, Catherine ; Lebovici, Elisabeth. *Femmes artistes / artistes femmes : Paris, de 1880 à nos jours*, Paris : Hazan, 2007

Ecce femina, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007, (Groupe Eidos)

- 1 These books span the often contradictory impulses that constitute the emergence of feminism as a both theoretical-strategic and a practical-tactical *inflection* of writing of art history and criticism. Differently oriented, the books address a common problematic, each explored by the opposing strategy. That problematic is the excessive visibility the feminine as a figuration in the image (*Ecce Femina*) and the created invisibility of women as creators (*Femmes artistes / artistes femmes*).
- 2 The *practical* inflection by feminism deconstructs the *created* invisibility of women —the unjustified exclusion of historically proven and documented artists from the official canon of modern only on grounds of their sex. A *theoretical* inflection elaborates semiotic analysis of the image, to expose a politics of representation, and to demonstrate that, however repressed from official acknowledgement, the asymmetrical axis of power: gender is always-already at work in the image, producing the paradox of the overexposure of the image of woman in a culture that cannot acknowledge the artistic agency of women. If art discourse promulgates sexual *indifference* (acknowledging only one sex and thereby allowing art and the artist to appear to be without sex at all), analysis of image-culture comes immediately face to face with the constant (re)production and negotiation of sexual *difference*. This appears one-sidedly. The signifier for the semiotic exploration of the formations and vicissitudes of sexual difference in

phallogocentric culture is typically the (dis)figuration of the feminine. As Laura Mulvey declared polemically in 1975: “The paradox of phallogocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on *the image* of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world. An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system; it is her lack that the phallus signifies.” (*Screen*, 1975).

- 3 These books complement each other as they indicate that we have to rewrite the historical record, to restore, without qualification, the presence of women as artists to our understanding of historical culture while insisting that all culture is already what Teresa de Lauretis calls a “technology of gender”. Catherine Gonnard and Elisabeth Lebovici do not merely catalogue names. Once we introduce this obliterated history of the feminine other into art history, its contours are transformed by the presence of women, themselves internally differentiated through class, sexual orientation, ethnic and cultural background: generation and geography. Focussing on Paris and the generations of modernists from 1880 to the present, the book plots the politically, aesthetically, materially and ideologically *differentiating* ways in which women from all continents intersected with the currents and cultures flowering in modernist Paris. Tracing multiple pathways through modernism’s many sites and possibilities, not merely adding women to standard stylistic histories, the book identifies thematic and historical axes revealed by this “other” traverse. There is no intention of providing names to be neutrally disappeared into an enlarged official story of modern art. Difference becomes an active, creative presence, as a result of extensive and inclusive documentary research into women as artists, photographers, dancers, gallerists, organisers, militants.
- 4 *Ecce Femina* reads case-studies, traversing the history of art. Woman appears in many guises from goddess to dominatrix, seductress to hysteric, colonial fantasy to animalised other. Such semiotic analysis explores the phallogocentric imaginary. Without a feminist inflection, there is a danger of compounding rather than shifting its hegemony. For some, feminism appears iconoclastic or demanding a new iconography of *La Femme*. The feminist shift occurs, however, with reading, reading for the woman, reading as a woman, reading for the “missingness” of women in their own enunciations or of readings that discover, unexpectedly, what I have called *differentencing the canon*: other possibilities already in the polysemy of the image that do not unproblematically affirm the phallogocentrism so often desired by the uncritical reader. How do we avoid re-inflicting the insult even when we aim to deconstruct the dominant image paradigms?
- 5 Different models of reading constructions of gender and often overt cultural misogyny stake out the challenge of analysing sexual difference in culture and of critically transforming culture through the reading and writing of cultural practices. Gonnard/Lebovici’s text integrates institutional, technical and semiotic-aesthetic analyses allowing women/artists to be creative agents working in culturally and historically determined circumstances: negotiating the changing conditions of classed, raced, sexed, gendered subjectivities and textualities. Making the women artists of France and Belgium [*Femmes artistes en Belgique : XIXe et début XXe siècle*] visible in their specificities extends the geographies of feminist research but also adds to the feminist literature on women in art a theoretically rich sophistication in the method of remapping histories of artists as always also histories of sexual difference in art’s representational practices.