

Rethinking Feminism and Visual Culture

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Art and Feminism edited by Helena Reckitt and surveyed by Peggy Phelan. New York: Phaidon Press, 2001, 304 pp., \$ 69.95 hardcover.

Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology, 1968–2000 edited by Hilary Robinson. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001, 706 pp., \$83.95 hardcover, \$36.95 paper.

Feminist Visual Culture edited by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajackzowska. New York: Routledge, 2001, 322 pp., \$22.95 paper.

With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture edited by Lisa Bloom. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 268 pp., \$49.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

Why are students today so afraid to identify themselves as feminists? When we address feminism and art in my contemporary art and theory courses, I commonly hear two negative responses. The first invokes the stereotype that feminists, particularly feminist artists, are bra-burning, militant man-bashers; the second is that feminist art and criticism is no longer necessary. In fact, my most homogeneous group of student artists (half men, half women, all white, and from middle-class families) argued that even studying the topic was moot because everything had changed; all was fine between the sexes in our new era of post (or post-post) modernism—an era where everyone's interpretation is allegedly valid, and marginal art and identities are not so marginal anymore. Because these ideas seem to be the current trend among students, these anthologies, published between 1999 and 2001, are significant. Overall, each volume uniquely re-politicizes feminist art and theory and emphasizes its influence on contemporary critical discourse in one or more of three ways: first, they redress how feminist criticism and theory has often become diffused into that of postmodernism by historicizing feminist intervention in the arts; second, they show feminism's pervasive role in all aspects of visual culture; and third, they explore feminism's interconnections with race, class, and sexual orientation.

Helena Reckitt's *Art and Feminism* and Hilary Robinson's *Feminism-Art-Theory* both collect a multitude of artist statements, art historical analyses, interviews with artists, and critical writings on art and feminism by women such as Mira Schor, Coco Fusco, Griselda Pollock, Linda Nochlin, Adrian Piper, Hélène Cixous, and Lucy Lippard, written between 1963 and 2000. Robinson's text divides its essays into chapters with related, but fairly rigid titles such as "Claiming Identity, Negotiating

Genealogy," "Body, Sexuality, Image," and "Activism and Institutions." Reckitt's volume also includes texts by men, including Jean Baudrillard's lush description of French artist Sophie Calle's 1983 performance *Suite vénitienne* and Bill Arning's praise of American Elaine Reichek's weavings. Although Robinson's text provides a greater diversity of essays, Reckitt's volume is lavishly illustrated.

Art and Feminism is part of Phaidon Press's recent Themes and Movements series, which includes other titles such as *Land and Environmental Art*, *The Artist's Body*, and *Arte Povera*. The Phaidon book contains three main parts: a survey essay by feminist performance theorist Peggy Phelan, a works section with lavish color photographs and explanations of the artworks, and a documents part—104 texts that complement the works illustrated. Rather than organizing the latter two sections by artist or writer, the editor has divided them into interconnected themes: "Too Much," "Personalizing the Political," "Differences," "Identity Crises," "Corporeality," and "Femmes de Siècle [a clever pun indicating a promising future]." This structure is useful, although a bit confusing, because many artists and writers appear in multiple places, thus emphasizing the tone and breadth of women's creativity, but also the overlap and difficulty in pigeonholing women's art into any narrowly defined categories. The authors make interesting and often disturbing visual juxtapositions, placing Hannah Wilke's photographs of herself dying of lymphoma next to a picture of Orlan, undergoing plastic surgery to transform herself into a famous work of art. One artist's pain is self-inflicted; the other is not. Both seem catastrophic. Other juxtapositions are more predictable like Lorna Simpson's *Back* next to Adrian Piper's *Calling Card*.

Art and Feminism's strength lies in its illustrations and its introductory essay by Phelan. The text surveys a wide range of artworks produced over the past forty or so years. Phelan's essay recounts a complex, albeit ironic, narrative (ironic because of feminism's resistance of patriarchal narrative structures) of feminist intervention in the arts, with important inclusions of women of color's impact on history, like Howardena Pindell's Artists-in-Residence or the Where We At: Black Women Artists group, both founded in the early 1970s. Phelan's background in performance theory also provides a novel approach to feminist practice. Drawing on the work of Tania Modleski, she writes that while feminism is a conviction, feminist criticism is a promise. Like a performative speech act, feminist creativity promises us the making of new realities: "Successful feminist art beckons us towards possibilities in thought and in practice still to be created, still to be lived" (20). Thus the book's title is not limited to the political undercurrent implicit in the term "feminist art," but leaves open a variety of practice ranging from Betty Friedan's 1963 *Feminine Mystique*, to Betye Saar's spiritual assemblages, to Zoe Leonard's erotic lesbian photography, to Jenny Saville's "grotesque" figural paintings.

In addition, Phelan effectively articulates the difficulty inherent in post-feminism's theoretical erasure of gender dichotomies and hierarchies, noting that in theory, "a futuristic vision of a world where men and women are just two of many sex/gender possibilities" sounds desirable, but in practice "experiences of embodiment (in terms of gender, race, class *and . . .*) continue to seek expression, even while the artistic and conceptual resources for such expression continue to be redefined" (20). This recalls artist and critic Adrian Piper's argument in her 1990 "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists" (reproduced in both Reckitt and Robinson) that in addition to believing in the postmodern theory of multiplicity over the linear trajectory of modernism, we also need to acknowledge the real truth of an historical narrative of prejudice, repression, and exclusion that many women have experienced (Piper 1996, 168–9). This is a quandary that I have no answer to and that needs further examination. One response that Phelan points out, however, is the direction taken by recent art historians, critics, and artists such as Lucy Lippard, Carol Mavor, and Joanna Frueh, that combines theoretical and personal modes of interpretation, and is rooted in the work of Julia Kristeva and Cixous. For example, Mavor's studies of nineteenth-century photography merge her own subjective desires in looking at and "knowing" photographs with theoretical discussions of the erotics of the gaze, adolescent sexuality, psychoanalysis, and contemporary photographic theory (1995, 1999). Surprisingly, none of these more intimate texts are reproduced here.

My dissatisfaction with *Art and Feminism* comes from its left and its documents section: it is an expensive, coffee-table-sized book with documents that are abbreviated versions of the original essays. Such trimming down provides the reader with only a cursory treatment of the issues, rather than a more in-depth understanding of them. For example, Piper's "The Triple Negation of Colored Women Artists," noted above, is condensed into two pages, reducing Piper's argument into a series of attacks against postmodernism, rather than a more nuanced discussion of the increasingly complex problems with the recent interest in, and now growing backlash against, multiculturalism. The same reduction occurs with other lengthy, landmark essays like Donna J. Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto," and Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" Perhaps it might have been more effective to limit the number of essays, but reproduce them in their original length. Another approach, which Robinson takes in her *Feminism-Art-Theory*, is to reproduce essays that are more difficult to find and do not appear in numerous other anthologies. Robinson notes that "It would be hard to overestimate the significance of Laura Mulvey's 1973 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' [and, I would add, Mulvey's 'Afterthoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' published eight years later, which is included in Reckitt's volume], but precisely because it has been so significant, it has been reprinted many times and is currently available

in a number of publications" (2). Thus, *Feminism-Art-Theory* includes Mulvey's and Nochlin's essays in bibliographies of essential readings that appear at the end of each chapter, and instead reprints lesser known texts such as Nochlin's "Courbet's *L'origine du monde*: The Origin without an Original." This essay recounts Nochlin's search for Courbet's infamous crotch shot painting of the same title with its rather unbelievable history—commissioned by Khalil Bey, a collector of exotica, and later owned by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan who veiled it behind a painting by surrealist artist André Masson. Both Robinson's and Reckitt's anthologies, however, are particularly valuable for their inclusion of multiple voices by artists and theorists across nationalities (although still Western), time periods, and ethnicities.

Like Phelan's essay, Robinson's introduction to *Feminism-Art-Theory* also poses a future challenge to feminist criticism by questioning the United States' dominance in the field. She admits that even in her exceptional collection of 99 Western-centered texts (also often abbreviated versions, but less so than Reckitt) from Australia, Great Britain, Ireland, and Canada, more than half come from the United States. She therefore asks that the dually nationalist and universalizing tendencies of U.S. feminism be constantly scrutinized in our changing global environment. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard's *Power of Feminist Art* (1994) is particularly guilty of charting such a non-self-critical history of feminism in the United States. Although its authors make a useful distinction between the Northeast, with its proclivity towards activism and protest, and Southern California, with its artist collectives and cooperative exhibition spaces, the greatest emphasis is placed on Southern California's influence without any acknowledged awareness of the problems that go along with such a focus. Nevertheless, the *Power of Feminist Art* remains one of the most important resources, rich in visuals, for students to begin to understand the development of American women's art. Robinson's essay, however, provides a new understanding of its critical shortcomings.

To counter narratives like Broude and Garrard's, Robinson's text includes essays by Freida High (Wasikhongo Tesfagiorgis), Coco Fusco, and bell hooks, all of whose work foregrounds the often ignored position of women of color within U.S. feminist discourse. For Robinson, a white woman living in Belfast, Ireland, it is voices like hooks's that resound most fully because of hooks's stress on politically specific models of identification and resistance (4). I find it difficult to believe that space (even though the book is 706 pages) prevented Robinson's inclusion of feminist texts outside the West—certainly a few essays from Indian or South African writers or artists (two countries heavily influenced by Western models of feminism) might have been added as complicating counterpoints, along with a short bibliography to direct students where to start researching beyond what is now considered the "feminist mainstream."

Feminist Visual Culture, edited by Fiona Carson and Claire Pajaczkowska, and *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture*, edited by Lisa Bloom, both attempt to widen the scope of art to include advertising, film, photography, and popular comedy. Dealing primarily with British visual culture, Carson and Pajaczkowska's volume reads too much like a textbook; consequently, its value lies in introducing students to the broad scope of visual culture rather than in giving any in-depth analyses of current practice. The book is divided into three general parts: "Fine Art," "Design," and "Mass Media." In her introductory essay, Pajaczkowska differentiates feminist analysis of visual culture from contemporary media and cultural studies by stating a rather obvious point: that it specifically focuses on how issues of "gender, sexuality, and power are inextricably intertwined in all aspects of our society's visual culture" (21). In discussing feminism's use of theory such as semiotics, structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstruction, she provides a good clarification of the logic of the gendered gaze—particularly Mulvey's and Christian Metz's work on it—and the notable influence of psychoanalysis on feminism through its emphasis on the maternal and coding of sexual difference.

For readers desiring a review of relevant theoretical literature and some select examples of how it applies to current feminist practice, *Feminist Visual Culture* fits the bill. However, each chapter, organized by media, provides only a limited treatment of women visual cultural makers in areas such as fine art, fashion, cyberfeminism, and television. In "Fashion," Rebecca Arnold surveys contemporary fashion's understandable interest in the body, performance, play, and gender transgressions by theorists like Jane Gaines and Elizabeth Wilson, alongside fashion designers Donna Karan, Anne Demeulemeester, and Miuccia Prada. However, a richer discussion might have also included related work, such as Elaine Abelson's *When Ladies Go A-Thieving* (1989), which examines how lavish displays in the newly designed department stores of *fin-de-siècle* America, France, and England intensified women's desire for objects and clothes and provoked a rash of shoplifting.

In another chapter on "Sculpture," Carson gives brief mention to a slew of well-known works (going beyond the sculptural) such as Meret Oppenheim's *Object*, the fur-covered cup and saucer; Louise Bourgeois's *femme-maisons*; Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's *Womanhouse*; Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document*; and Jo Spence's *Narratives of Dis-ease*; then concludes with a lengthier, but still cursory, discussion of the representation of the female body in *Sensation*, the controversial exhibition of new British art shown at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999. Oddly, Chicago's *Dinner Party* does not appear in "Sculpture," but instead in Carson's introduction to "Part 1" on Fine Art. Yet while Carson describes it as "the most famous and controversial icon of 1970s art" with

its vaginal-shaped plates and place settings devoted to famous historical women, she does not fully explain the range of criticism leveled at it during the 1970s and 1980s, nor its body-oriented influence on today's female artists (29). Certainly, many deemed it pornographic and essentialist, but Chicago's recognition as its "genius creator," and its virtual exclusion of ethnic and lesbian identities were also rather troubling factors. Consequently, if I used this book for teaching, which I would be hesitant to do because of its focus on Britain, I would necessarily supplement it with texts by many of the writers and critics reproduced in Reckitt's and Robinson's anthologies.

Lisa Bloom's *With Other Eyes*, which grew out of a 1997 conference on Gender and Race Politics in Visual Culture, attempts to add to the more canonical literature on feminism and art. To do this Bloom collects eleven essays, foregrounding Jewish, Latina, and African American female identity, on aspects of visual culture that would normally fall outside the scope of art history. The book's often-complex language directs itself toward scholars well versed in race and gender studies and advanced art history. Similar to the anthologies *Visual Display: Culture Beyond Appearances* (Cooke and Wollen 1995) and *The Familial Gaze* (Hirsch 1999), which include diverse subject matter and writing styles, Bloom's volume ranges from theory-driven essays by Jennifer A. González on contemporary artists Renée Stout, Jenni Lukac, and Amalia Mesa-Bains, to more traditional image- and film-based analyses by Shawn Michelle Smith on African American photography, and Ann Pellegrini on Sandra Bernhard's comedic performance. Interspersed are two additional reflective essays by Aida Mancillas, Ruth Wallen, and Marguerite R. Waller—participants in *Las Comadres*, a border collective comprised of women artists, educators, and critics centered in the San Diego/Tijuana region—and a collaborative photo-essay about black lesbian identity by photographer Zoe Leonard and filmmaker Cheryl Dunye, made for the film *The Watermelon Woman*.

As an entrée into the book's focus on ethnicity, Bloom, in "Ghosts of Ethnicity," highlights how the narrative of artistic modernism, with its interest in universal, formal developments rather than culture, race, or nationality, was inextricably bound to a politics of identity. This idea is now generally accepted in art history and readily evident when one looks at the fact that the white male American, abstract expressionist artists largely gained caché through criticism written by white, Jewish, male art critics, namely Clement Greenberg, the most prolific and powerful of the critics. After World War II, during a period of American cultural, economic, and political hegemony, these men were interested in purging art of politics, which was an easy feat with the normative, invisible ethnic identities of the white males. However, it was a task made much more difficult, in fact impossible, with white women or artists of color who could

not seem to escape race and gender associations with their art. Bloom's revision of the universalist story of modernism then opens the door for the succeeding authors' investigations of race and gender in contemporary and historical visual culture.

One of the most illuminating essays in *With Other Eyes* is Smith's "Photographing the 'American Negro': Nation, Race, and Photography at the Paris Exposition of 1900," which compares two documentary photographic displays in the American Negro section of the Paris Exposition. One group of photographs, taken by white professional photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston, documents the Hampton Institute, a school for African American and Native American students founded in Hampton, Virginia, 1868. The other series of images, previously unknown to me, are full frontal and profile portraits of African American subjects that were collected by race activist and founder of the NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois. While the goal of this exhibition, which African Americans organized, was to represent the race "as thoroughly modern members of the Western world," the effect of the two groups of photographs differed dramatically (59). Through thorough visual analyses, Smith convincingly argues that Johnston's photographs presented her subjects conforming to a white-constructed vision of U.S. national identity, while Du Bois's choice of images articulated his theory of double-consciousness—dual, often unreconciled ideals of "Americanness" and "Negroness." Hampton students salute the American flag or actively study a Native American man garbed in skins, headdress, and moccasins, while they, themselves, wear dark dresses and suits to demonstrate the assimilation process quite overtly. In contrast, Du Bois's albums do not buy into the story of assimilation, but instead show multiplicities of blackness through shots of subjects with various skin tones, wearing elegant dress. These albums thus support Du Bois's view of race as culturally, rather than biologically determined, by disputing the idea of racial purity. Further, the images do not represent any idea of "real" blackness, but show its multiple dimensions, including the Du Boisian "Veil" that "distorts images of African Americans by projecting them through a lens of colonial desire" (77). As support, Smith illustrates a photograph of a young black boy, dressed in a suit and immaculately groomed, gazing off into space. Yet, taken alone, this image could also represent the very idea of assimilation that Smith argues against and that Du Bois believed would be the ultimate, favorable effect of the development of his "talented tenth."

The other essays explore similar themes but take different tacks. Francette Pacteau's "Dark Continent" is the most uninspiring of the group. Building on scholarship by Richard Dyer, Sander Gilman, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and Kristeva, Pacteau rehearses African women's (and those of African descent's) historical associations with nature and sexuality, and white culture's continual fascination with their supposed abnormality

and excess. Her insights on race, primitivism, and dancer Josephine Baker have been more complexly, and more originally, explored by recent texts such as *The Art of History* (Collins 2002), *The Black Female Body* (Willis and Williams 2002), and *Rhapsodies in Black* (Powell 1997).

In comparison, Pelligrini's fresh reading of Sandra Bernhard's parody of whites imitating blacks in her 1990 film *Without You I'm Nothing* argues that Bernhard's slippage between Jewish, lesbian, white Gentile, and black are each such tenuous identities that they all remain simultaneously real and unreal, realized through performative acts and spectatorship. Like Pellegrini, González, in "Archaeological Devotion," also argues for the unfixing of the identity of objects, particularly when they continually morph between the position of cultural artifact, personal expression, and museum piece through her reading of the autobiographical, spiritual, found object-filled installations of Amalia Mesa-Bains, Renée Stout, and Jenni Lukac. Although I respect González's scholarship in general, this essay's jargonistic language and quick shifts back and forth between artists and artworks distract from her ultimate point, which seems to be about the ordering and reordering of things that are tied to race, gender, and religious ideologies by artists who are themselves imbricated in such ideologies and experiences.

With Other Eyes attempts to destabilize the normative power of white ethnicity by instead highlighting the multitude of other identities and the difficulty in marking them in our contemporary culture. Yet, to return to Phelan's point about the limits of post-feminist theory, the theoretical erasure of racial, gender, and sexual dichotomies and hierarchies seems practically impossible. Certainly, I would like a world where all these things didn't matter, but they still do matter. These texts, however, provide some needed insight into how our categories have historically been, and continue to be redefined, so we do not simply theorize ourselves "out of our minds," but instead pay attention to women's very real experiences—made evident through artistic expression and critical writing—and think positively about the future.

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