

# Mobile Fidelities

Conversations on  
Feminism, History and Visuality

Martina Pachmanová

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## Introduction

**Martina Pachmanová**

*Times change, people move. There is the question of ego. "Mobility." The development of self. The self, learning to cut itself off from others, looks for its best setting, like a jewel. [...] Paradoxically, she has come to believe more and more in the possibility of change.*

(Martha Rosler)

*Interview is to art history what an intimate journal is to literature.*

(Marcia Tucker)

Spontaneous and random decisions combined with unexpected coincidences sometimes give birth to projects that would never come into existence through pragmatic planning. Such was also the beginning of this book.

In the fall 1999, I received a curatorial research stipend to work in New York City. With a small office, a rented two-story room in a charming loft in Tribeca, and a handful of money, I appeared in the turmoil of this American metropolis, which has dominated the world art scene for nearly half a century now. Since nobody cared much about whether I spent my green banknotes buying clothes or hanging out in night bars, I had an enormous amount of freedom for a few months but I also had to cope with the fact that whatever I did I had only myself to rely on. Living in New York was both fascinating and overwhelming. I was familiar with life in the United States from a number of my previous visits, but this was the first time when I was fully and also painfully aware of being uprooted. I was falling in love with the city that never sleeps - with all its sweet, sour, smoky, and spicy smells, traffic jams, shining skyscrapers, and ethnic mixtures, but I felt that my new passion stripped me bare. I enjoyed my new situation but I also felt more vulnerable than ever. I wanted to hide

my otherness, even though I knew that speaking with accent and having a slightly strange body language and a different dress code is more a norm than a stigma here. I felt exposed all the time. This mental loss of mimicry made me search for new ways to think about myself and my position in the world. I started to write a journal. My New York journal is a collage of glosses on art and life - a hybrid combination of cultural journalism, travelogue, intimate diary, and poetry, accompanied by hundreds of photographs, in which my professional and my private voice blurred. Being with/ in my journal was neither an escape from the situation nor a self-indulgent gratification of my suddenly fragmented ego. Rather, it was a way, maybe the only way, of simultaneously entering into a dialogue between myself and the people around, a means to become comfortable with being different and with knowing that a full possession of oneself is not only impossible but also undesirable. Last but not least, it was about how to incorporate my dissimilarity into the work I wanted to do.

It is still difficult to say whether it was mainly a surprisingly high degree of permeability between my own private and my public "self" that impelled me to ask questions about how loose is this boundary for other people. Besides innumerable anonymous visits to museums, galleries, and public talks, and various studio visits with artists who I was meeting at exhibition openings or who were affiliated with the same international art and curatorial program as myself, I wanted to talk to people who had influenced my own academic and curatorial work, and who had crucially transformed the character of contemporary history, theory and practice of visual culture.

As an art historian, curator, and writer from Prague, I had been examining gender and feminist issues for a number of years. However, because of the prevailing ignorance and sometimes even intentional discrediting of this problematic by most Czech academics and intellectuals I was forced to search for information, sources, but also critical feedback and discussions relevant to my interests outside of my country. This fact is a sad, but perhaps comprehensible residue of the socialist era and its ideology, which closed down upon debates in any sphere of professional and public life, which maintained a false illusion of women's emancipation, and which consequently generated both anxious mistrust in any unknown "-ism" (especially when it carried any left-wing connotations of social justice) and condemned it dismissively as imported dogma. The official ideology of the socialist government in former Czechoslovakia conceived feminism as a bourgeois relic and tried to efface all the imprints which the modern, pre-Second-World-War women's movement had left behind and it seemed gender issues were irrelevant even for people from the other side of the political spectrum because if there was any power mechanism that needed to be fought against and undermined, it was the "genderless" totalitarian regime. Then, however, the patriarchal and sexist bias that controlled the private and public lives of the entire population - be it inside or outside the official structures - remained intact and unquestioned.

My own studies of art history clearly reflected this situation, and this was representative of the general tendencies of both scholarly research and art criticism in the country. Unless one repeated the ideologically correct models of interpretation, any analysis of content outside of the “canon” meant risking political persecution. As a result, our teachers wanted to avoid any ideological standpoint and mostly focused on style and technique. The formalistic approach kept art and art history at a safe distance from not only the influence of communist ideology but also from the quotidian struggles of everyday life. During the totalitarian era, such an attitude might have been liberating but it also created a false notion of art as a politically neutral, purely spiritual concept in which the transcendental creativity of the artistic genius spoke only universal “truths”. That gender issues had no place in this conception of art history thus should come as no surprise.

Although the situation has been slowly changing since the early nineties, I am still primarily obliged to foreign scholars, curators, and artists for both helping me to see the cultural dynamics of gender in its asymmetries and for “nourishing” my intellectual desires over a significant amount of time - be it through personal contacts or through reading their texts and looking at their art. I am cautious about any uncritical or blind application of Western intellectual discourses, including feminism, onto societies that for geographical, political, economic, religious, or cultural reasons exist beyond the imaginary yet clearly drawn demarcation line of the “First World.” And yet, my life and my work would undoubtedly be very different, perhaps obediently anchored in the familiar terrain of settled and steady ideas, identities and habits, without my repeated encounters with the “West,” namely the United States, during the last ten years.

All these reasons are one way or another encoded into the genesis of this project and they also determined the selection of personalities I wanted to interview. The fact that they were only women is not a consequence of a pure chance: it clearly demonstrates the state in which feminism finds itself at the turn of the millenium. The concept of “gender” might have shifted and crucially extended the focus of feminist research in various disciplines, but the adjective “feminist” still designates a domain where men are rather an exotic species. The sphere of visual culture is certainly no exception. For instance, when I visited the annual Feminist Art and Art History Conference at Barnard College in the fall 1999, I was struck that among hundreds of scholars and students attending the event there were only some dozen men. The year after, the gender proportions at the conference were similar and I realized that although most contemporary feminists reject separatism and ostentatiously call for a dialogue with men, changing feminism’s status as an exclusively women’s agenda is terribly difficult.

My choice of whom to interview was impelled by desire for a plurality of opinions rather than by any need to claim any ideological line. And yet, it was inevitably a result of my personal preferences, and - since I decided against using any other

means than a face-to-face conversation - of my counterparts' physical accessibility. There are many other brilliant feminist thinkers working in various fields of art history and visual culture both in the United States and elsewhere who would naturally belong to this volume. However, subjectivity and situatedness have been such central elements of this project on both thematic and structural level since the very beginning - in so far as they are simultaneously performed in the text through the first person voices, and theorized on a discursive level - that an "objective" anthology of conversations would adapt to what I wanted to dismantle. Although these conversations have gone through many phases since the recording, and I transcribed and edited them back in my home city, I still think about them as a special extension of my American diary. I firmly believe that the non-academic but profoundly self-reflective dimension of this origin does not disqualify but supports these conversations' historical, theoretical, methodological and critical value.

Being aware of how many original ideas, groundbreaking opinions, and crucial pieces of information get lost when their only "storage space" is human memory, I bought a small, twenty-dollar plastic tape-recorder and a pack of micro-cassettes to record my conversations. While some of the conversations still exist in invisible, acoustic form on narrow, brown tapes in my archive, waiting for the right moment to be transcribed, many others have passed through the miraculous transformation from sound to text. The amount of time I spent preparing, conducting, transcribing, and editing the talks sometimes seemed to be endless but it is still fascinating and thrilling to me to see the immaterial, yet incredibly lively voices changing into a written and more permanent structure. In a sense, this metamorphosis could be read as a metaphor of one of the central feminist issues: How can women (and other marginalized groups) speak so that they would be really listened to? In other words, how to make visible (and readable) what has been forgotten, and what was subdued by various systems of power? If oral history was for a long time disqualified as second-rate or unreliable because it did not conform to the "objectivity" of modern scientific reason, I believe that its expressive, emotional, and somehow outlawed narratives contribute to the critical and political mobilization of those who used its various forms most: women.

Of course, the women who talk on the pages of this book are not in any sense marginal. All the eleven of them - Carol Duncan, Jo Anna Isaak, Amelia Jones, Natalie Boymel Kampen, Linda Nochlin, Martha Rosler, Mira Schor, Kaja Silverman, Susan Rubin Suleiman, Marcia Tucker, and Janet Wolff - have significantly contributed to feminist art, art history and cultural criticism in both the United States and around the world. Whether they work in academia, museums, or make their own art, these women have been shaping all the three areas named in the book's subtitle - *Feminism, History, and Visuality* - for many years now. They represent a great variety of ideas informed by post-structuralism, sociology of culture, psychoanalysis,

phenomenology, queer theory, comparative literature, and post-colonial studies. However, these academics, curators and artists do not speak here the same language that is commonly deployed in graduate classes, academic books or artistic magazines. Entering a dialogue, and directly responding to both my questions and the particular setting of our interview, they avoid disembodied, anonymous and authoritative proclamations. Instead, they use the language that is deeply embedded in their life and professional experiences, and that incorporates the atmosphere of these most concrete places. In its immediacy, this language is situational and performative rather than instrumental, and it thus makes the texts more potentially social and political. It shatters the illusion of mastery and the unity of the subject, and enables otherwise unlikely reflections and rich reciprocal activity with the reader. If these women let their “I” speak in their writings and subvert the notion of the text’s “objective truth”, then their spoken statements - excited, ecstatic, emotional, sarcastic, conciliatory, or doubting - enable them to enact and mobilize their subjectivity on a more fundamental level, not only within themselves but also in their positionality. However, in contrast to the “rough” journalistic character of many live talks, the conversations in this book are structured so that the testimonial authenticity and passionate tone of the spoken word is intertwined with both intellectual profundity and stimulating flow of the text.

The course of no conversation can ever be fully designed ahead, and I was many times struck by receiving unexpected answers that often changed the direction of the talk, and consequently generated new questions and new meanings. Through these dynamics of conversation, the book provides the reader not only with lively statements emerging from one-to-one debates; it also allows him/her to “hear” things that traditional written texts usually render inaudible. When I was recording these conversations, I was in living rooms, kitchens, university offices, gardens, bars and cafés, and the sounds of these places - phone ringing, coffee-maker hissing, glass tinkling, voices of waiters, husbands, children and students - made each meeting unique and unrepeatable. Moreover, their informal course, relaxed atmosphere, and humor of my American colleagues radically differed from my expectation of having official and impersonal debates with distant authorities. For instance, while the pioneer of feminist art history was pushing the button of her soft, leather tip-up chair during our evening meeting so that she was comfortably reclined in front of me in an almost horizontal position, it was only later that it occurred to me that interviewing could be seen as a form of psychoanalysis, although I was not sure that sitting “above” the reclining academic and asking her questions necessarily meant that it was not me who was an analysand. A few weeks after this experience, I talked to a woman whose intellectual statements were accompanied by the blissful murmuring of her newly born daughter. I experienced many other, similarly charming and moving moments, and although their authentic reconstruction is

beyond both the capacity of this book and the literary genre of conversation itself, I still hope they echo in the texts.

The women who speak in this book are well known in various circles in the academic and art world, and all of them have published extensively. However, instead of either simply repeating or maintaining their ideas and arguments that have been already written elsewhere, their statements here add other dimensions to their published work, shift their points of view and allow otherwise unlikely encounters of ideas through their reflections - retrospectively as well as prospectively on the impact of feminism on visual culture and society in general. I thus hope the polemical, lucid, open-minded opinions and tireless intellectual curiosity that resonates throughout this book can significantly contribute to current feminist debates about visual culture, art history, museum and curatorial agenda, and interdisciplinarity.

In one of the conversations, Kaja Silverman speaks about her interest in certain psychic displacements that expand the value of a love object through what she calls 'mobile fidelity'. It is this capacity to address over and over again particular issues from moving perspectives, which defines the content of this book, and which reverberates and multiplies in its title. It is this capacity to get engaged with both feminism and visuality, to be still willing to challenge and expand historical approaches, politics, and methods, to undermine their own biases, and, last but not least, to search for multitude of possible links between them and other discourses, which was a driving force of this project.

*Mobile Fidelities* is about trespassing. I have been spending a lot of my adult life travelling, living, studying, or working abroad, wondering increasingly where I and other people belong, and how one's own identity is constituted in today's globalized world. Being away from home, uprooted from my own culture, and using the language that is not my mother tongue (or as Rosi Braidotti suggests 'there are no mother tongues, just linguistic sites one takes her/his starting point from?'), I was, once again, in a nomadic state while working on *Mobile Fidelities*. It was also this physical and psychic dislocation that maintained my yearning to unsettle geographical and other frontiers, and shatter some of the hegemonic conventions and monolithic identities, which discourse itself regularly produces. Migration is certainly not the easiest and the most comfortable state of mind and body, but it is one which most of the women speaking in this book have their own experiences. Migration can sometimes make us perceive the space, time and the whole world around us anew, and enable us to reach a certain degree of personal transformation. In a sense, this book is an attempt to transgress an often hierarchical relationship between the "I" (or the "we") and the "other" through figures and processes such as 'consensus building' (Tucker), 'dialogism and intersubjectivity' (Suleiman), the 'agency of libidinal desires' (Silverman), a 'chiasmatic' relationship with others' (Jones), 'flickering' strategies of art production' (Rosler), a 'politics of interrogation' (Wolff), or a means of 'modifying the imaginary construction of the author' (Nochlin).

I was born at the time the second wave of feminist movement had just started in the US, and my professional and personal experiences differ strongly from the experiences of the women I interviewed. Besides other factors, it is also my cultural, social, political, and generational difference which I hope can support the book's critical insights and subsequently create new forms of gendered discourse(s). Examining how we are positioned not only within hierarchies of power and authority but also in relationship to other women and marginalized groups, and how to challenge the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion (center/periphery), underlies my project in *Mobile Fidelities*. Although all the women interviewed in the book live and work in the United States, the contrast between their and my age, background, and life, as well as various modes of boundary-blurring, which are discussed and deployed in the book, should withstand the problems of any geographically or culturally defined intellectual ownership as moving beyond a "them" and "us", including any U. S. feminist and scholarly colonization of the "West" and "the rest."

The intention and meaning of many of my questions and comments might undoubtedly seem different when approached from what we rather misleadingly call the division between the "West" and the "East" in Europe. What sounds obvious, or even naive, to the Western audience, could be new, provoking, and mind-opening in the former Soviet Bloc countries, and, of course, the other way around. This split is certainly palpable in *Mobile Fidelities*. Quite paradoxically, this book was published in a rather minor Slavic language, Czech, before it is finally coming out in the original English version now. If we consider that the number of Czech speakers is like a drop in the sea compared to the ever-growing English speaking world, this information might sound irrelevant or marginal. And yet, not only is my "otherness" present in the book but it was also evident in the "otherness" of the Western feminist discourse which was painfully present in the process of translating the book for its first edition in Czech. Only when I began preparing the book did I fully realize how much any language is imbued with ideology, and also how inconspicuously but effectively its linguistic signs influence our thoughts, behavior, and speech. I urgently felt the difference between my "self" in my native tongue and my "self" in a foreign language, "English". I struggled with translating words but also ideas and discourses relevant to feminism, gender, and the entire socio-cultural agenda of the "West," because - on both a practical and theoretical level - such concepts have very different connotations in countries such as the Czech Republic, if they exist there at all. And yet, the book is more about bridging the gaps than deepening them. Although the original goal of *Mobile Fidelities* was to introduce the debates about U. S. feminist art, art history, and visual studies to the readers in my home country, and the course of my questions is, at least partly, contingent on such a task in whatever language it is read, the book also emphasizes that each individual's language has the potential to initiate a communication exchange because it rests on the borderline between oneself and the other.

*Mobile Fidelities* is divided into eleven chapters, each representing one conversation. Their sequence is arranged neither in chronological nor in hierarchical order. Rather, I organized them so that dynamic links between various arguments – whether in agreement or conflicting – could be more apparent without flattening the polyphony of the whole. Although the conversations do not need to be read in the existing order to reveal these links, the book’s arrangement follows an invisible narrative. This narrative, dispersed rather than linear, takes the reader to a journey that unwinds several overlapping themes: Art History and Historiography (Nochlin, Kampen); Subjectivity and Identity (Silverman, Suleiman); Aesthetics and Sexual Politics (Jones, Schor, Isaak); Society and the Public Sphere (Wolff, Rosler); and Art Institutions (Tucker, Duncan).

As a book of conversations, *Mobile Fidelities* is full of questions – from simple ones that call for straightforward answers to those whose length and complexity *a priori* render univocal and unambiguous reactions impossible, and to those that are not explicitly pronounced, but remain somehow hidden in the structure of the text, be it on the interviewer’s or the interviewee’s side. Although these questions change from talk to talk, they are loosely, yet unmistakably tied together by several meta-questions: How are history and visibility gendered? What modes of historical narratives and memories (personal, political, traumatic, embodied, imperfect, unstable) shape the representation, preservation, and transformation of the past? How does sexual and gender politics influence contemporary theories and practices of art, art history, and art criticism? How is the subject constituted, and how can we create and exercise new models of subjectivity for reconceptualizing our past, present, and future? Where do art, feminism, and politics intersect in today’s world? Under what terms can we keep undermining grand narratives and authoritative “truths” without abandoning political and social responsibility? How should we think and practice feminism during the “post-feminist” and post-Cold-War era.

The conversations were recorded and edited during the period of twelve months, between the fall 1999 and the fall 2000, in New York City, Cambridge (MA), and Los Angeles. The conversation with Janet Wolff is the only one that took place outside of the United States during her visit to Prague.

Although *Mobile Fidelities* does not follow a chronological line, it is enclosed by the conversation I accomplished last. During one weekend afternoon, I talked to Carol Duncan in her spacious apartment that overlooks Central Park and East part of Manhattan. The last recorded sentence of this conversation, which later became the concluding sentence of this book, might sound almost paradoxical. However, faced with the gender bias that still exists in the U. S. society and culture, and with many young American women’s anxiety to be labeled with “the F-word,” and, perhaps most importantly, with the fact that women in many other parts of the world are still being silenced, Duncan’s statement ‘Maybe feminism has just begun’ cut me to the quick. It clearly and explicitly summarizes what is recurrently expressed throughout

this whole book: the fact that feminism is institutionalized in many Western academic and cultural spheres does not mean that it is on its death bed but, rather, that it needs critical self-reflection or even reinvention. Similarly, the notion of feminism starting again from scratch does not dismiss or obliterate the work women did in various fields, including visual culture, during the last three decades; on the contrary, it calls for feminisms that would always be in process - that would keep raising new questions instead of self-indulgently dwelling on their own successes, past battles, and already found answers.

The end as a new beginning - or, *vice versa*, the beginning with an open end - gives me a lot of optimism. It incorporates the paradigm of “mobile fidelity”, which is itself open-ended and highly experimental, and which runs through the labyrinth of ideas in this book like Ariadne’s mythical red thread. From the feminist perspective, many old myths might be gender-biased, but they are also beautiful, playful, and, most importantly, their multifaceted and mutually interrelated stories call for new interpretations. Thus, even Ariadne’s love that helped Theseus to find the exit from Minotaurus’s labyrinth could appear as a symbolic trope in a new light here. Instead of reading it as another male dismissal of a woman, it could be seen as a challenge for both: for Ariadne to search for the ball of thread that would lead her out from the darkness of sorrow and powerlessness to the world of joy, visibility, and knowledge, and that would allow her to play and shine on the sky of blinking stars, which are - spatially as well as temporally - close and far, present and absent, stable and mobile; and for Theseus to realize that fighting the “other” - be it Amazons or other unknown “monsters” - supports his ego but it deprives him of the possibility to move and change, without which he will never see beyond the bastions of the canonized Athens with their ‘intact facade of aestheticized perfection’ (Kampen), or beyond other fictive sites of immune power and images of ideal integrity.

Finally, the conception of a never-ending and ever-moving story gives feminism a chance to become a transformative force: to free us from the burden of a fixed past without being cynically relativist, politically desperate, or utopian, and without succumbing to personal or collective amnesia, or - to paraphrase Kaja Silverman again - to move us ‘from the having-been to the not yet’ so that challenging, subversive, and critical thoughts can ‘come to us from the future’.

Prague, 2002

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Pachmanová writes mainly on modern and contemporary art, concentrating on issues of gender, sexual politics, and feminism. In 1998, she was awarded a Research Support Scheme grant to work on a project “Re-thinking Modernism: Women, Art, and Czech Society, 1895 – 1939.” As a Fulbright Fellow, she continued her research on gender politics of Central European modernism and avant-garde at Harvard University between 2000 and 2001. One of her most important texts on feminism and art history was anthologized in a bilingual publication *Genderová studia v umění a kultuře / Gender Studies in Art and Culture* (Bratislava: SCCAN, 2000) under the title “What Is Art History Afraid Of?”. Pachmanová translated and published this book of conversations in Czech under the title *Vernost v pohybu: Hovory o feminizmu, dějinách a vizualite* (Prague: One Woman Press, 2001). She is also the editor of an anthology of texts about feminism and visual culture entitled *Neviditelná žena / Invisible Woman* (Prague: One Woman Press, 2002). Recently, she published her dissertation *Neznámá území českého moderního umění: Pod lupou genderu / Unknown Territories of Czech Modern Art: Through the Looking Glass of Gender* (Prague: Argo, 2004).

