

Subjectivity and Identity

Subjectivity In Flux

Susan Rubin Suleiman

When I was a student of art history, I was taught that academic writing is essentially connected to objectivity. Overwhelmed by this unwritten imperative, I had a hard time to find my “own” voice, and it took me quite a while to realize that to invest the “I” into one’s work could be incredibly enriching. Your work is significant for bringing together criticism, history, and personal memories and experiences. At one point, you said that this process is a way of “putting yourself into your writing.” Why does subjectivity matter for you?

Maybe I have been corrupted by my engagement with post-1968 French thinkers who made me realize that there is no such a thing as a disembodied and non-localized, eternal “truth.” From then on, I always asked the question “Who is speaking?” The identification of who is speaking enables the listener to have a new way of both understanding and evaluating the meaning of what is said. The danger of this for critics might be a predigested reading and judgement, looking for a demonstration of what one already knows - or what one thinks one already knows, based on the author’s identity. However, I believe that the challenge, for both author and audience, is to remain open and avoid that which is all too familiar and to allow for surprise with every new reading and writing. If a reader can foresee what a writer will say, they are both in trouble.

How did this influence your scholarly work?

My first major piece of academic writing was a study strongly influenced by structuralism, a book called *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre*. It was published in 1983 but took at least six or seven years to write,

so it was begun in the heyday of structuralist approaches to literature. I tried in that book to study in a “scientific” way a genre of fiction which seeks to impose certain preconceived interpretations on the reader. But in the course of writing, despite my “scientific” objectivity, I found myself strongly emotionally engaged with works I was examining. It was the first time when I included my personal opinions, even biases, into my academic writing, because I was simply too much struck by my own responses to leave them aside. Thus I can say that my awareness of subjectivity came out of an interest in a reader’s response. Of course, it could be a viewer’s response as well, in the sphere of visuality. Around the same time, I started to do work on theories of reading, and co-edited a book *The Reader in the Text* (1980) that reinforced my interest in reception. From a distance, it seems to me that I’ve always worked on material that evokes significant subjective feelings on the part of the reader or viewer, whether it was the ideological novel, or the radically different work of the avant-garde. The responses to such works are endlessly varied (“This is unreadable! This is violent! This is offending! This is garbage! This is confusing!”...), but they are all remarkably emotional, and that’s what fascinates me.

Many writers or artists who deal with the personal are, more or less, egotistically focused on their own subjectivity. When you speak about subjectivity you tend to emphasize the personal in a dialogical (or maybe even dialectical) form in which a process of self-recognition works not only for the author, but also for the “consumer” of the piece. How is autobiographical writing related to autobiographical reading?

Dialogism is a concept that certainly informed even my earliest work in which, paradoxically, I was dealing with an extremely monological genre. Reading such a self-centered mode of writing, however, can provoke a unique communication, in which the reader talks back to the piece, or, indirectly, to the author of the piece. I consider the interaction with the work of art one of the richest cultural processes because one projects oneself into what one reads or sees. We can go further and say that there is yet another dialogism between the commentator and the reader of the commentary, and such interaction can be endless.

Then an individual experience necessarily leads to a collective experience, and vice versa.

Yes - as long as we keep in mind that each member of the “collective” is entitled to his or her own individual response.

I assume you would agree that many women artists, writers and academics significantly contributed to a “discovery” of a personal and intimate voice in the late 1970s and beginning of the 1980s. However, the subjectification of both practice

and theory soon became almost fashionable in the West. The excavated “I” was often taken for granted, because many authors suddenly believed that mere sincerity of feeling and faith in the power of experience could be enough to produce an original work of art or a good critical text. What kind of relationship could we as critics develop towards this proliferation of egotistical and uncritical subjectivity that we can still see around? And also, how can we use the internal voice in a productive and not simply a relativist way?

The awareness that not all subjective exploration is of interest to other people and that some of it can easily grow into a kind of self-indulgence is extremely important to keep in mind. The only protection against such a narcissistic gratification and complacency is a degree of skepticism about the value of your own work and your opinions, feelings, and judgements. As critics, we especially should have a strong sense of the pertinence of the personal in any form of commentary. To fill critical writing with passages like “A funny thing happened to me on a way to...” is, very often, embarrassingly empty rather than critical or provoking. Yet to make a banality or an intimacy part of a critical structure can, in certain circumstances, be very effective; in other words, “pertinence” is a linguistic concept. The subjective response has to be a necessary part of the argument to be valuable and productive; if the subjective element is purely contingent, and could be taken out without the piece losing its complexity, it is a superficial filler.

Although it is clear that one cannot think of the writer being a disembodied ego, as soon as we “embody” our writing, we might run the risk of essentialism. One of the most striking things about your work is the presence of the maternal body in it. Titles of a few chapters in Risking Who One Is (1994) are relevant to this topic as well: “Writing and Motherhood”, “On Maternal Splitting”, or “Motherhood and Identity Politics”. Your book Budapest Diary (1993) carries the subtitle “In Search of the Motherbook.” How can one’s writing be “maternalized” without being haunted by biological determinism? How can the mother be represented as subject in a culture that provides only a very limited framework for her creative expression, if any?

Just to complete your listing, even in *Subversive Intent* (1990) there is a whole theory about a “playful mother.” My idea of the avant-garde is closely linked to the feminine possibilities of play. This is in contrast to the more familiar idea of the avant-garde, as in Marcel Duchamp or Max Ernst, based on the notion of a clever and disobedient son who thumbs his nose at his father, and ignores or even hates his mother as a conventional and repressive authority figure. Ultimately, this is a masculine model, because it comes out of an identification with the paternal side, condemning the mother as an authority without any actual power. As a number of feminist theorists have shown, the Oedipal struggle between father and son, while waged “over” the mother, also excludes the mother. In *Subversive Intent*, I was

trying to imagine a different figure of the mother, and concurrently a different model or discourse for the avant-garde. Instead of a little boy playing near his silent mother, why not imagine the mother herself playing? I devoted a long chapter to a novel by Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet*, which has as its comic heroine and narrator an aged mother - a crone, actually. Carrington's novel (written when she was quite young, and had young children) shows the possibility of an irreverent, playful attitude for women, and specifically for mothers. It's very much inspired by Surrealist notions of play (Carrington spent several years in the Surrealist circle in the 1930s and early 1940s), but it is "anti-Surrealist" in the way it celebrates the mother, and an old mother at that. The Surrealists loved to insult mothers (they saw them as the perfect embodiment of bourgeois propriety), and they liked their women childlike and beautiful!

In the essays referred to in *Risking Who One Is*, I was less concerned with theorizing the avant-garde, and more focused on personal issues of my own when my children were growing up. Is it "selfish" to take some time out for my own work instead of devoting myself 100% to my sons? During that time, I did a lot of reading in psychoanalysis that made me realize the validity of questions like this not only for my life, but for my critical thinking as well. The psychoanalytic subject is constructed from the point of view of the child, mainly the male child. As we know, Freud had relatively little to say about girls, but he and the entire psychoanalytic "school" that came after him was obsessed by defining the mother's role. Most often, the role of the mother was to "be there" for her child, with no consideration of her own needs. Karen Horney is an exception to this, though she writes more about women in general than about motherhood; and Winnicott's concept of the "good enough" mother can also relieve the pressure of aspiring to be the "perfect mother." Generally, even female psychoanalysts have tended to emphasize the child's subjectivity rather than the mother's. Helene Deutsch, of course, was strictly Freudian. But Melanie Klein too had the child's perspective in mind when she spoke about the "good" or "bad" breast and the child's relation to it. One finds almost no conceptualization of the mother as the subject in psychoanalysis; the only psychoanalyst I can think of who has tried to do that is Jessica Benjamin, with her notion of intersubjectivity - mother and child, with the emphasis on their communication. It is important to conceive the mother-child relation as a genuinely intersubjective one, not as a relation of subject (child) to object (mother).

Your interest in the maternal closely connects you not only with Freudian or Lacanian psychoanalysis, but also, and perhaps even more significantly, with feminist philosophers such as Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous...

Kristeva's essay 'Stabat Mater' is a crucial text for me, especially because it comes out of her own experience of being a mother, which radically differentiates it from

Freud or Lacan. Moreover, Kristeva discusses another, much older Western tradition, Christianity, which is focused on the cult of the mother. She shows how the figure of the Virgin Mary is defined in relation to her son, and how Christian iconography emphasizes the notion of the perfect mother as somebody who prostrates herself before her son. Again, it was masculinity in front of which the ideal woman was to kneel. Kristeva has been accused of idealizing the maternal, and that's what you were getting at in your previous question. We have to understand that in this essay she was reacting against the particular strain of feminist thought in France that originated in Simone de Beauvoir's enormously influential *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir, intellectual women's emancipation and motherhood were totally opposed to each other - in this, she was quite similar to the Surrealists. In contrast, Kristeva brought these two concepts together, and used the figure of the mother to stand for the "dissident," whether male or female, which I consider to be a strong argument against those who criticize her for reinforcing biological determinism. This liberatory view of the mother was shared by Cixous who, in her beautifully lyrical way, was saying that to have a child doesn't make a woman less revolutionary. Cixous also emphasized the erotic and sensual aspect of the mother's relationship to the child in giving birth or breast-feeding. Back in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was seen as essentializing the female body. I believe, nevertheless, that this "maternal discourse" is a very rich and provoking phenomenon, because it provided another allegory of femininity that opened new ways for feminist thought. It challenged the concept of feminist "unanimity" as well as the concept of the total social constructedness of gender, both of which could lead to a view of motherhood as incompatible with intellectual and political activity for women. My concept of the "playful mother" as an enabling myth for the theory of the avant-garde is similarly linked to understanding motherhood as a potentially subversive cultural and social force. It is a "maternal" discourse that associates the mother not only with taking care of children, but also with sexual desire, intellectual power and political engagement. I find this configuration neither contradictory nor blindly utopian. Cixous's concept of the sexual dimension of writing that she has described in terms of "making love to the text" is not only poetic, but also very liberating.

In this context, it is also significant to see a large number of contemporary women artists working with body and sexuality, who break many feminist taboos of "politically correct" representation of femininity. Rather than adopting symbolism of the 1970s central core aesthetics, these women artists (some of them would most probably call themselves bad girls) use explicit sexual imagery to reveal women's sexual desire that could be very liberating. And yet, they are often criticized for re-establishing the role of women as passive objects of male desire. In Risking Who One Is, you brought up the question of where does the sexual and gender difference reside, and even though you spoke about ideological interests and social determination, you claimed that "the body keeps intruding."

A lot of sexually explicit imagery used by contemporary women artists is certainly different than what was done thirty years ago. However, there is a similarity in some of the hostile reactions, even by feminists, to these “disobedient” girls who paint penises and vaginas, or write about orgasmic pleasure: they are accused of pornography, while the earlier artists were accused of essentialism (or, in some cases, also of pornography). It makes me think about the narrow-mindedness of these reactions, which deny female sexuality and pleasure, thus making women one-dimensional beings once again. If the asexual mother producing babies is the ideal of religious conservatives, the counterfigure for feminists should not be the asexual, non-maternal intellectual and activist. In general, we should be suspicious of “ideal models.” Including, of course, our own! I wrote the sentence about the “intruding body” more than ten years ago but I still stick with it.

The other day, I was reading an interesting book, Focus on the Maternal: Female Subjectivity and Images of Motherhood (1998), by Ulrike Sieglöhr. While discussing photography and the status of the mother as creator, Sieglöhr argues that a gradual but significant shift in feminist artistic and writing practice occurs today: that from the daughter’s to the mother’s point of view. Would you agree with it?

Strictly speaking, it’s probably exaggerated to speak about the mother’s discourse taking over the traditional daughter’s discourse. Just look around you, it is still not so common to see women scholars or artists being mothers. There are still the same social, psychological, and financial pressures that women have to deal with when they try to do at least two important things at the same time: raise a child and produce significant intellectual work. Do we have good quality day care? Do we have fathers who take an equal position in raising children? Do we have friendly work hours? Women have a bit more than they had some twenty years ago, but these questions continue to play a crucial role in most professional women’s lives.

On the other hand, while it was almost forbidden for a 1970s feminist to speak about motherhood, contemporary feminism seems to be much more informed by it. Sieglöhr, for instance, analyses in her book contemporary photography that either works with and challenges traditional maternal images or is done by artists-mothers. She does not seem to care about statistics (although numbers are important sources of information about the society) as much as about the discursive dimension of motherhood. Even though some might condemn it as a mere theory, I believe that no change in society is possible without a discursive premise.

That’s a very important issue to be discussed among both feminist and non-feminist scholars. As we know, maternal images are usually interpreted either as unquestionable models of ideal motherhood, or as expressions of uncritical

sentimentality, if not kitschiness. To look for other ways to produce and analyze such images (can they be at once positive and unconventional, even revolutionary?) could help to reconsider what motherhood represents in our society.

Challenging gender bias in avant-garde literature and art is the key for your academic work, and it is the Surrealist movement you seem to be particularly devoted to. In this context, I cannot help asking you about your reaction to Rosalind Krauss's Bachelors (1999). Discussing the work of Dora Maar and Claude Cahun in her introduction, Krauss argues against the common feminist notion about the subjugation of women Surrealists to their male counterparts' imagination. It is your essay on women Surrealists published in Subversive Intent that has become a target of Krauss's radical disagreement. Could you comment on it?

Rosalind Krauss and I criticize each other in print, but we are friends and we respect each other. In 'Double Margin', the first essay of *Subversive Intent*, I pointed out a narrow understanding of subjectivity in Krauss's work on Surrealism and photography, and called for a revision of this concept. What I found mostly problematic is that when Krauss says 'women are the subject of Surrealist photography', she in fact means that they are the "objects" in front of the camera. She never takes into account the concept of subjectivity to ask how women become creative artists themselves. To write about Claude Cahun, a woman photographer and a lesbian who was constantly "pushing" the boundaries of sexual identity in her work, without ever discussing the issue of her gender is, I think, a mistake. Krauss never asked a crucial question we started this interview with: Is the subject of artistic creation embodied? Another notion of subject that never came up for Krauss is the Foucauldian definition of subject as one who is "subjected", whether to the gaze of the photographer or to his physical power. In Surrealist photography, women were also subjected in this way. Hans Bellmer's pictures of his lover Unika Zürn tied up like a piece of meat are a great example. I am not one of those who would condemn Surrealism en bloc because some of its male artists subjugated women in this way, but we still have to be aware of this dimension of Surrealism and question the meaning of these acts. The absence of such considerations in Krauss's work continues to disturb me.

You have an extensive experience with diaries, journals, and oral history, including interviews. How could these peripheral forms of historical narrative change writing history, or, simply, our attitude towards the past?

Oral testimonies - by women, war victims, survivors of torture or prison - are extremely important for a process or rethinking what we know about the past or the concept of History. The more "raw", "uncultivated", or simply marginalized forms of

histories we will have, the richer the concept of our past will be, but also the more challenging our attempt to make sense of it. I think that although testimonial documents that are considered more “authentic” because they are, or seem to be, “unmediated” or “unrehearsed”, they should be treated like any other historical document, that is, with skepticism as well as respect. What I said before about critical responsibility of inserting the personal into writing can be applied to this issue as well. It should always remain our responsibility to ask at what level the testimony could work. Are we going to use testimonies to establish “facts?” If so, then we need to have some criteria of verifiability. But we can use testimonies not for the facts they may provide, but also for the affect of emotion they communicate. When we consider the geographical, cultural, political and psychological specificity of a person who shares with us his/her information, then the testimony can become part of the history. Personal testimony, whether factual or emotional, should not be divorced from the larger context that gives it historical meaning.

You spoke now about history, mentioned war, and even used such a strong term as “responsibility.” I wonder how we can use such morally imperative words after the lesson of post-structuralism and deconstructivism that tell - and even convinced - some of us that the universal truth is not possible any more. Should we follow postmodernist relativism that was introduced by Jean Baudrillard in his seductive and appealing theory of the simulacrum? I used to be provoked by Baudrillard for a long time but I think now that he, quite cynically, shuts down any possibility of being responsible in and to this world. It seems important and also encouraging to me that within the last couple of years - after conflicts in former Yugoslavia and elsewhere - the question of both individual and collective political and social responsibility was again raised by a number of intellectuals.

The interest in ethics in culture and academia is not only reflected in your previous answer but it seems you have been concerned with these issues for a long time. You even proposed a term “ethical postmodernism.” How can we as scholars, writers, and critics to get engaged with political responsibility without being either didactically propagandistic, or eclectically trivial?

Whatever we do, we should never forget this question. In the essay you refer to, ‘The Politics of Postmodernism After the Wall, or What Do We Do When the Ethnic Cleansing Starts?’, I argue for the importance of understanding that there is no God-given truth. It does not necessarily mean that you wash your hands and say: ‘It’s how it is, and therefore I’ll do nothing.’ There is always the possibility for the theoretical understanding that your position is determined by your particular context and your actions are the result of that understanding. Being aware of a multiplicity of points of view doesn’t entail dismissing values one believes in. Of course, values change as the circumstances of our lives change, but awareness of the relativity of one’s own

values, which Richard Rorty calls irony, is not necessarily in contradiction with one's need to act on those values at any given time. I criticized Rorty in my essay, because he claims in his book *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that the ironist's position is good for private life, but has no role in the public life. Since Rorty tends to identify the ironist as "she," it occurred to me that this split amounted to saying, 'Women's place is in the home!' Seeing the flood of smug rhetoric that overwhelms our public life, I wonder whether it wouldn't be helpful to have a certain degree of self-irony in public discourse. But personally, I think that an occasional turn to irony - in the Rortyan sense, which is not at all the same thing as Baudrillardian cynicism - wouldn't paralyze our public discourse of existence. On the contrary!

The notion of the political responsibility of intellectuals is also closely related to the concept of the avant-garde. In the end of the 1980s, you and Alice Jardine ran a Summer Institute for College and University Teachers that was focused on 'The Future of the Avant-garde in Postmodern Culture'. Unlike a lot of other feminist scholars, you have never despised the ideas of the historical avant-gardes. What can we learn from the avant-garde agenda at the beginning of the twenty-first century or should we learn from it at all?

In *Subversive Intent*, I spoke about the "avant-garde dream", which was to combine artistic experimentation with political or social innovation. The Surrealists, for instance, wanted both social revolution and revolutionizing of art. They failed, largely because the people who wanted social revolution (at that time, the Communists) hated their art, and the people who loved their art were very suspicious of social revolution. My argument in that book was that the desire to be innovative on these two fronts exists even in postmodern culture, mostly, among marginalized groups: women, homosexuals, the formerly colonized. If we consider, for instance, the strength of the feminist movement and the fascinating body of work that women artists produced in the 1980s, the dream of the collation of politics and artistic creativity was certainly alive. This position of mine some ten years ago was not solitary; it was also that of other theorists, such as Hal Foster, Linda Hutcheon, or Andreas Huyssen. However, the situation has evolved and my position has changed as well. I see more clearly now how easily various kinds of mechanisms of social and cultural control (art market, advertisement, censorship) swallow discourse and exploit it, sensationalize it, and, ultimately, capitalize on it. In such a context, the "avant-garde dream" is an empty concept, and programmatic statements about combining radical social practice with genuine artistic innovation are a bit foolish. And yet, I don't want to proclaim that 'everything is corrupt' - that would be both cynical and hysterical; nor do I want to claim that we should adopt a passive, conciliatory attitude toward how things are. The world is changing so fast - think, for example, of what the astounding growth

of the Web in the past two or three years has done to our sense of time, space, and communication. Undoubtedly, this offers undreamed-of possibilities to artists, including new ways to pursue the “avant-garde dream.” As we know, social or political engagement in art can take many forms, from explicit statements in the works of Barbara Kruger or Jenny Holzer to visual metaphors, as in Kiki Smith or Cindy Sherman, just to remain in the feminist domain that we are already familiar with. But there are many other ones to be discovered!

You were born into a Jewish family in Budapest just a few years before the Second World War, and your experience from that time is the experience of a child who had to hide her identity and change her name in order to survive. Some ten years ago, in an essay devoted to H  l  ne Cixous (who was born in 1937), you asked: “Is it possible for a European born before 1939 to think of history... as anything but a form of luck?” I am fascinated by your comparison between history and luck, and even thought I think I understand its meaning in the context, in which you wrote it, I wonder what implications the notion of “luck” could have on reading history? And, last but not least, what impact does your personal war experience have on your work?

The big illumination for me came when I realized that my life experience was radically different from somebody who was born only five years later, because my first memories are from the last two years of the war - in other words, I actually remember what to someone born in 1944 is only hearsay or imagination. What effect this had on my future professional life is hard to say. I was trying to figure that out during last few years, and that’s why I went back to Hungary and wrote my book *Budapest Diary* (1993). “Luck” is a philosophical concept for me. It is something that we cannot influence or control. Perhaps the most horrible torment (at least, mentally) about Holocaust victims is that they had no means to determine their fate. And if they survived, their survival could not be ascribed to their own capabilities. I am not talking here about Jews who made a wise choice to leave Hungary or Germany in the 1930s. I am talking about people who were under Nazi control during the war, like my family in Budapest in 1944-45. We did not get deported, we did not get shot into the Danube, we did not starve to death - not because we were exceptionally smart, but because we were just damn lucky. “Luck” is a philosophical question because it asks to what extent our decisions determine our lives. My parent’s decision to hide in Budapest under false identities helped us survive, but it wouldn’t have necessarily worked for other families - and it could have not worked for us. I don’t want to completely relativize our past, but I believe that, as far as history is concerned, the concept of luck is an important means for challenging the idea of fixed truths, “right” choices and “wrong” choices. The consequences of our decisions are usually unpredictable, and that’s what makes our lives so rich but also so difficult.

The most appropriate thing to say to conclude this conversation should be, then, "Good luck!" But before doing that, let me ask you the last question, which would, in a way, relate your personal history with the question of difference we already touched upon. Your Budapest Diary provides plenty of interesting observations about both gender and the racial agenda in Hungarian society. Do you see any relation between sexism and xenophobic, or racist tendencies in contemporary Eastern Europe?

Both sexism and racism involve the construction of an "other" by a dominant group. Women are the "second sex," the "weaker sex," they are different from "us" men; foreigners, Jews, Gypsies, people with "dark" skin are different from "us" white people. In both these formulas, "different" also means, of course, "less good." For decades under Communist rule in Eastern Europe, difference was not discussed, one could even say was not tolerated, as a concept: all citizens were theoretically "equal", even though everyone knew that some were more (or less) "equal" than others. After the fall of the Wall, ethnic and national differences suddenly came to the fore, but in an extremely troubling way. Since nothing had been discussed, people returned to traditional concepts of national identity and started the business of reconstructing their traditional "others". The results, as we know, have been horrendous - not only in former Yugoslavia, but also in former East Germany, in Slovakia, in Hungary, or even in your country, where ugly strains of racism have surfaced with more or less virulence. How to accept and even celebrate differences without immediately constituting them into a hierarchy, that's the question. And while we, in the West, may have gone further in theorizing that question and trying to live accordingly, we too have a long way to go.

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Press, 1999). Silverman has also written recent articles about Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Jeff Wall, and Allan Sekula. She is in the process of completing a book called *Flesh of My Flesh*, which offers a political, philosophical and aesthetic response to our current historical moment, and imagines a radically different relationality

Her first book was *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), followed by an edited anthology of texts, *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986). Her other books include *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), and the autobiographical *Budapest Diary: In Search of the Motherbook* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996). She edited the volume *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travellers, Outsiders, Backward Glances* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), and - together with Eva Forgács - the anthology *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Hungary* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2003).