

Aesthetics and Sexual Politics

Ripping Off the Emperor's Clothes

Jo Anna Isaak

The impact of women artists on contemporary art has increased enormously within the last three decades. As a number of cultural critics, including Craig Owens and Arthur Danto, have noted feminism significantly contributed to the postmodern attempt to undermine the stereotypes on which post-Enlightenment society, art, and art history were based. Despite a recognition that "our" history, and the values that shape it, have been built on the asymmetrical power positions of the sexes, most public art institutions remain male-centered. The current curatorial strategy of MoMA still follows the famous 1932 diagram of Alfred Barr which unconditionally proposed a linear reading of art history, a reading which is a priori exclusive. If "affirmative action" is insufficient because it doesn't challenge the gender politics of art institutions, what is then the most effective way to make women more visible without turning them into mainstream artists?

Large American museums such as MoMA with their blockbuster shows are really, to a large extent, about power and financial speculation. They are playpens for the rich - places to have parties in. They have very little to do with art. I don't believe that any grass-roots-based political movement like feminism can penetrate those places. The level of financial outlay that goes on in these institutions is so big that it creates a kind of corporate model, and there are very few important museums in the U.S.A. that escape this limitation. If mayor Rudolph Giuliani, the current mayor of New York City, is generous to a museum, it is not because he is committed to supporting their programming, but because the board members of the museum supported his election campaign!

In New York City, I can think only of the New Museum of Contemporary Art (when it was directed by Marcia Tucker) as an example of an independent museum.

Although I am delighted to see art by women and by artists of color exhibited or purchased by major museums here and there, it happens too seldom to signify any crucial transformation in museum policy. You just have to think about what it means to have your programming governed by the rich and your revenues generate by tourists. It means you put on yet another Picasso and other “geniuses” show. It might sound cynical, but I see these institutions as comparable to the Academy in the nineteenth century - dinosaurs in decline.

Several artist, especially Hans Haacke and the Guerrilla Girls, have pointed out what is happening to museums, and for me this kind of “non-museum” work is far more interesting than the Picasso show in the museum. Currently, at least in this country, most of the interesting art projects take place outside of major museums - on the streets, in artists-run centers, alternative spaces, or in university galleries. This suggests there is “another” history of art which has nothing to do with the mainstream institutions and museums. Instead of the history of art, there are many histories of art in the making, and they sometimes don’t even meet.

Let’s just look at the “millennial” exhibition Modern Starts in MoMA that includes work by 9 women among 176 artists! I don’t like statistics very much but the disproportion is very telling. Moreover, the visitors of this show can read wall texts like this one: “While artists have typically portrayed themselves or their male acquaintances with pensive, penetrating, or painted expressions, female faces are often represented as placid, calming, or slightly mysterious. Several of the works here exploit the psychological effects that the ‘eye contact,’ or the lack thereof, can have for the viewer. While a direct gaze from the subject of an artwork provokes feelings of psychological connection between that subject and the viewer, a subject’s averted eyes can suggest withdrawal or reverie... In the modern period artists continued to exploit the body’s inherent expressiveness. They also relied on many of the figurative contentions that had become familiar from the past, such as the reclining nude whose sinuous curves offer the viewer visual pleasure, or the penetrating portrait whose subject’s gaze resonates psychologically.” But such “facts” about modern art call for a critical comment from the perspective of women - artists, museum goers, etc.?

Those sound better than most labels. You should have read the wall labels for the “Picasso’s Women” exhibition in MoMa in 1996. Those were hilarious - pure masturbation. However, interpretations such as this one only show that the sexual politics we have thought of, or rather been trained to think of, as incidental to the discourse of art history is central to its whole operation. And as Jenny Holzer put it “Abuse of Power Comes As No Surprise.”

We touched upon the representation of the female body, which dominated the

canonical works of art in the West; the female nudes were products of male originality and “divine” creativity. However, although women were a rich source of inspiration, they could not make art themselves for a long time. As you precisely put it, “without the image of women, the discourse (of art history) collapses.” Then, it comes as no surprise that it is the representation of women, femininity and female sexuality which most feminist theories of visual arts criticize as a sign of men’s control over women.

Even though I agree with this argument, I believe that the dual model of looking/being-looked-at is much more complex, and that not all distorted female nudes in modern painting are necessarily symbolic expressions of male artist’s desire to debase and torture the “weaker sex.” Images often look back at us, and some painted nudes return our voyeuristic look in a very self-confident way – just look at Manet’s Olympia. A simple duality of this interpretative model might more or less work before the end of the 19th century, but it falls apart when we consider women artists who started represent female nudes at the beginning of 20th-century. The separation between subject and object, and thus also between looking and being-looked-at, is one of the central dogmas of the modern epistemology which feminists themselves should shake off. Wide-spread feminist rejections of any depiction of nudity is connected to the anti-pornographic movement, but it also appears dangerously close to sexually oppressive dogma of both right-wing conservatism in the West and Communist ideology in the East. How do you as a feminist art historian deal with this paradox?

Historically, it is interesting to look at Olympia as a kind of pivotal moment in the change of impositions, and perhaps even the beginning of women’s emancipation in the realm of both visual culture and modern society. Victorine Meurent’s look is unforgettable, and it certainly is not a look of a submissive personality. In terms of feminist art history, there are not many scholars who read the visual imagery in such a simplistic and didactic way as you suggested, but there may still be some. Dismantling this subject-object duality without losing the critical approach towards power mechanisms of visual representation is a difficult process, but when we look at contemporary art practices that’s exactly what many women artists successfully do. Literally or metaphorically, they rip off the emperor’s clothes in the most provocative manner, and their work speaks as much about sexuality as about ideology embedded in visual language. Still, using women’s bodies in the process of attacking clichés on which the visual culture is established is a risky and radical business, but when it is done well it can very effective. To appropriate the very language of what one wants to confront might be, after all, one of the most efficient forms of deconstruction, and could be applied to both pornography and conservative thinking of any kind. Right now a number of black artists are adopting this strategy in relation to the

stereotypes surrounding the representation of the black body. And it is not easy. Artists such as Robert Colescott, Kara Walker, Michael Ray Charles face a lot of criticism in these days.

In your book Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter (1996), I haven't found any example of non-representative art. All women artists whose work you discuss work in a figurative manner, or use language/text. As if you would want to suggest that abstraction and feminist art are mutually exclusive.

My first book, *The Ruin of Representation in Modernist Art and Texts* (1986), was centrally engaged with the political implications of the development of abstraction in modernism. However, as to the absence of any discussion of abstract art in my book on feminism and art, except a brief historical discussion about women artists of the Russian avant-garde, you are right. I don't mean to imply that feminism and abstractionism are contradictory, but abstract painting was certainly not a common art practice amongst feminist artists in the 1980s, when I started to address it. A good analysis of contemporary women painters, some of whom are abstract, is by Mira Schor in her book *Wet* (1999). She gets into the Greenbergian demand for flatness and delimitation of space, and examines what impact this anti-illusionism had on women, and how their paintings related to body, space and pleasure.

Psychoanalysis has become very popular among feminist scholars, including art historians, and your work is informed by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well. Freud's analysis of dreams based on the premise of repressed desires and libidinal forces opens an interesting path to an examination of other forms of repression, even the patriarchal one. Lacan's "split subject," which is a result of symbolic and language productions, radically disturbs the traditional idea that people are biologically determined. Although both of these psychoanalysts can help us today to understand the cultural and social constructions of gender, they created very phallogocentric theories. How can such these theories be applied to the feminist art history?

You can't blame the mapmakers for the terrain. Freud and Lacan didn't create the phallogocentricity of the culture we live in; they simply provided us with theories by which we can understand its operations. We were speaking earlier about a contemporary understanding of the gaze in Manet's Olympia. The same power dynamics were present in Manet's Olympia long before Lacan provided us with theories to understand their operations. It is true that whatever enabling theories women may be able to obtain from Freud or Lacan, they have had to wrest them

from the writings themselves. Most feminist scholars are engaged in a re-reading of psychoanalysis in order to make a new use of it. It is a tool, not a religion. Instead of taking psychoanalysis as gospel or something one has to believe in, one should use it as a tool for deconstructing sexual myths and gender stereotypes. If there is something in psychoanalytic theory that is really useful, it is what it tells us about the mechanisms of power that modern society deploys on everyday level. It shows us how the patriarchal system operates, and that is the point one has to start with while using Freud or Lacan.

For instance, Lacan's analysis of women's relationship to language - how femininity is embedded in language and how language structures position of the female subject - is extremely important for any feminist scholar who wants to understand gender construction. It doesn't matter what Lacan himself thought about women. What matters is what his theory has enabled women to discover about their position within language, and how this has helped them to challenge that position.

It seems to me that some postmodern art historians and critics, including the feminist ones, started to mix up modernism and avant-garde. Lucy Lippard, for instance, argued that the character of feminist art is that "it can be aesthetically and socially effective at the same time," by contrast to the masculine avant-garde model, in which the creative isolation of the artist, out of touch with society, is valued. Similarly, Norma Broude emphasizes the formal obsession of the avant-garde, which strongly differs from the feminist art legacy. However, unlike the formalist hegemony of modernism, the main goal of the avant-garde was to blur the boundaries between art and life! The avant-garde might have run into troubles because it was too naive and utopian, but it wanted to challenge social realities and cultural myths. I agree that we must question the problematic role of women in the avant-garde movements (if these movements have accepted them at all), but I also believe that there are more affinities between feminism and avant-garde than many feminist scholars want to admit. After all, doesn't "The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter", a subtitle of your book Feminism & Contemporary Art (1996), clearly speaks about this link?

When you talk about "Art into Life," you are actually using a slogan of the Russian Avant-garde, and that idea has very different implications from how it was conceptualized, for example, in the U.S.A. or Western Europe. The avant-garde in Russia with its huge impact on both art and society has to be distinguished from an aestheticized form of the avant-garde, i.e. modernist formalism. In my book, I talk about how and why the women artists of the Russian avant-garde were more successful in making the connections between art and life than their male contemporaries. These women were much more interested in what could be

considered “low” art forms or crafts. They designed everyday objects such as dishes, clothing, or furniture and thus helped to build a “total” living environment. Consequently, these Russian women artists sometimes managed to transform a utopian concept into a practical reality. Also, in that period of time gender barriers were just blown away. No matter how brief this moment was, there was a genuine will for equality between men and women. What a time that must have been for both men and women! We should look at this episode as a model, fragile as it was, and realize that the avant-garde efforts in Europe and the U.S.A. were different: they were mostly male and patriarchal enterprises. However, as soon as the avant-garde in Russia was shut down, and socialist realism took over, women artists vanished. All of a sudden, there was no space for women because the new propaganda reinforced the old patriarchal control in both art and society.

To answer your question in contemporary terms, yes, I believe that there is a strong relationship between feminism and an avant-garde practices which leads us back to why women are not in the museums? But what do the museums have to do with either art or life? I might be cynical again but my answer is: very little. That is why you will find women artists rather out in the streets, dealing with the garbage, or the problems of landfills, toxic dump sites, water pollution, etc. This is what it means to bring art into life!

What you just said about the Russian avant-garde shows how important it is to acknowledge historical and cultural specificity in various locations. It also shows that writing feminist art history, as any other history, should not be dominated by any explicitly defined model of interpretation. The question is: How can we use the legacy of Western feminism and gender studies in other geographical settings without introducing new versions of intellectual colonialism? How to reflect who we are with where we are, that is where we are positioned not only within power and authority hierarchies but also in relationship to other women?

There is no doubt that the Western feminist model doesn't apply, for instance, to the East European setting, and as art historians we have to always respect this. When I started to travel to the Soviet Union about twenty years ago, I was meeting a lot of women artists who were members of the Union of Soviet Artists; and in Latvia, the head of the Artists Union was a woman. I realized that these women don't need to import Western feminism. Not that they don't have their own troubles with gender inequality, but these troubles were of a different kind than those I knew from the West. What they needed, and most probably do need even today, is to find their own way of approaching feminism.

Part of your scholarly interest is focused on Eastern European art. You have visited the former Soviet Union several times, and the entire chapter of your last

book is devoted to Russian women artists. As you know, feminism is received rather awkwardly in that part of the world, which even reinforces the phallo(go)centricity of many academic disciplines, including art history. How did you end up writing about women artists in the world behind the "iron curtain?"

In 1980, when I was graduate student, a friend who was an art critic was invited to Moscow for the opening of the exhibition *Paris-Moscow 1900-1930*, and he invited me along. Ironically, his visa didn't come through but mine did, so I went by myself. I arrived to Moscow to see the exhibition but the opening was delayed for a week. With the help of one of the French curators I was allowed into the Pushkin Museum for the whole week while the workers and curators were installing the show. I was in heaven. I spent the whole week surrounded by works of art, some of which had not been seen since the 1920s.

Interestingly enough, most of the people installing the show turned out to be artists themselves and they would take me back home with them in the evening. Back then Western visitors were rare birds. That's how I hooked up with Soviet art circles. I realized that I wanted to continue to work on this art and I began to apply for some exchange programs. As a Canadian, I had much better chance to travel in Soviet Union than most Americans. First, it was mainly women artists of the Russian avant-garde I studied there. However, I got to meet many women working in the museums, and through them I was introduced to a number of wonderful contemporary women artists, and started to systematically learn about their work. Although Soviet society - as I remember it - was overwhelmingly dominated by men and probably very sexist, artists seemed to have a space of their own. At least some of them. And, in a way, I was lucky enough to come there during the 1980s, which was a much more liberal period for artists than it used to be in the beginning of the Cold War and - it seems to me - a lot more interesting than it is now.

I love to hear stories like this because they make me realize over and over again that a common tendency to strictly separate our professional lives from our private lives just doesn't work...

Yes, how you get to a place, who you meet there, and what you end up talking about is sometimes much more important than anything you may have planned to research. Both life and work are often a result of random events...

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