
*Vision and Difference* opens with a rhetorical question: 'Is adding women to art history the same as producing feminist art history?' Clearly the answer is no; as Pollock has argued since *Old Mistresses* (written with Rozsika Parker, 1984) 'demanding that women be considered not only changes what is studied and what becomes relevant to investigate but . . .challenges the existing discipline politically'. It is the 'structural sexism' of art history (as a particularly conservative academic discipline) that must be challenged and exposed. This will not be achieved by a feminist history that stops at revaluing women's work in its separate sphere: only if 'we insist that sexual difference is produced through an interconnecting series of social practices and institutions' (including those of art) will the 'hierarchies which sustain masculine dominance come under scrutiny and stress'.

For more than a century feminist art history has been pulled between the poles of 'sameness' and 'difference': women are as good as men (by the same criteria) though subject to difficulties and discrimination in practice, or women produce a specifically womanly art with womanly values (something long argued by writers who patronize women). Pollock changes the terms and avoids the impasse, drawing on Marx from the *Grundrisse* to shift attention from artists and objects and on to the 'rich totality of many determinations and relations'. The concept of artistic creation is replaced by cultural production, stylistic periodization is replaced by 'regime of representation' (defined as 'the formation of visual codes and their institutional circulation'), and femininity as a given (in the body or experience) becomes with the insights of linguistics and psychoanalysis a matter of the institutional and discursive *positioning* of feminine subjects. Historians are required in consequence to think the relations between what is at any moment designated an artistic practice, and all the related beliefs and activities that give it meaning. We have to understand - in Pollock's example - the position of the Royal Academy visitor bringing to
her appreciation of nineteenth-century domestic genre not only particular assumptions about what art was and was supposed to do, but also a quantity of ‘ideological baggage composed of . . . illustrated papers, novels, periodical magazines, books on child care, sermons, etiquette manuals, medical conversations’ and the rest.

The encounter of feminism and art history is complicated by the existence of several feminisms and several histories, by the tension between feminisms and their several relations to ‘femininity’, and by the metaphorical play of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ across the narratives, concepts, and vocabulary of art history itself. (Not that this is acknowledged in the language of connoisseurship, which is addressed to a discriminating but otherwise socially undifferentiated subject.) The generalized profile of art history is a matter not only of how it is taught and practised in the academy - which is of course how academics think of it - but of how it informs a range of related activities in schools, museums, auction houses, general publishing, and the mass media. The principal components of this paradigm derive from an empirical Anglo-American tradition based on description, biography, attribution, and connoisseurship - as opposed to a more rigorous Germanic tradition rooted in philosophical aesthetics and iconography - consolidated in a depoliticized, modernist art history devoted to questions of style, attribution, dating, authenticity, rarity, and the revaluation of forgotten artists.

In the 1970s a ‘social history of art’ was developed and transformed by Marxists, feminists, philosophically inclined art historians, and theoretically self-conscious strays from adjacent disciplines. It is nevertheless possible to argue that these developments were both limited and marginal (by comparison with the transformation of cultural studies, and film and literary theory over the same period), and that Nicos Hadjinicolaou’s claim that art history is ‘one of the last outposts of reactionary thought. . .still stagnating in the first stage of its development’ retains its resonance. And this is crucial for feminism, as Pollock points out. Feminism will always be disabled by the principal terms of modernist art history: its formalism and ahistoricism, its reverence for the avant-garde and the individual artist-hero, its concept of art as individual expression or social reflection, its sense of itself as objective and disinterested, its pursuit of universal values at once transcendent (of mundane social relations) and intrinsic (to the autonomous work of art, severed from the social circumstances of its production and circulation). A feminism that does not contest the principal terms of the dominant discourse will be tamed by what it leaves unquestioned: there will be no new knowledge but only a poignant parody of the old. The category of ‘art’, the boundaries, concepts, and language of historical inquiry, the privileging of the artist, and the invisibility of the viewer must be reworked, not in some abstract theoretical space, but as part of the understanding of objects and relations that are locally and historically specific. This is not in any easy and homogenous sense ‘feminist art history’ and Pollock suggests that we talk instead of a feminist intervention in the histories of art. What we have is not ‘feminist’ (in the sense of a local interest, easily packaged and dismissed), and not art history (in the sense of a discipline evaluating an arbitrary set of historical artefacts), but rather a
materialist-feminist analysis of culture as the realm in which meaning and value are produced through exchange.

Pollock argues the case in her introduction and in the opening essay on 'Vision, voice and power' (1982); in 'Modernism and the spaces of femininity' she indicates how such a project can be put into practice. She writes from a position informed by Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, and those aspects of continental thought (such as discourse theory) which lend themselves to political analyses. On the one hand, believing that 'High Culture plays a specifiable part in the reproduction of women’s oppression', she addresses herself to the contemporary effects of what are still the dominant modes of art historical activity. (She castigates the Tate Gallery's exhibition and catalogue on *The Pre-Raphaelites* [1984] for their active production and circulation of traditional stereotypes of masculine creativity and passive feminine beauty.) On the other hand she offers a vigorous critique, both of the depoliticized strains of the new art history ('theory soup'), and of the gender blindness - or at least short-sightedness - of the Marxist tradition.

This is an approach that is markedly different from most feminist art history in the United States, where, despite the suggestiveness of essays by Linda Nochlin and Svetlana Alpers, emphasis is placed chiefly on a liberal history of women artists. (The politicized and deconstructive turn of British writing is sometimes applauded but is regarded, on the whole, with curiosity and suspicion.) In Britain, more than the engagement with European Marxism in general, the particular influence of *Screen* magazine has been decisive. Throughout the 1970s *Screen* provided the principal forum in which continental debates on ideology (Althusser), semiotics (Saussure), psychoanalysis (Lacan), and - as Pollock points out - the relation of realism to a political art practice (Brecht), were rehearsed. In 1980 Pollock joined Mary Kelly on the editorial board and *Screen* published articles on Manet by T. J. Clark and Peter Wollen in a temporary alliance with radical historians in the visual arts. These are the names, together with those of Elizabeth Cowie and Laura Mulvey, that share the textual limelight in *Vision and Difference*; references to other feminist art historians - Lynda Nead, Tamar Garb, Kathleen Adler, Eunice Lipton - are mostly relegated to the notes.

The debates around representation, politics, ideology and subjectivity, originating elsewhere but developed and accessible (well, fairly accessible) in the pages of *Screen*, provided material for historians struggling to put back what art history leaves out. As Panofsky noted long ago, where historical analyses deal primarily with artistic intentionality, or with the presumed artistic volition of an epoch, they are condemned to a vicious circularity of argument: assertions about the work are advanced on the basis of observations about the artist's feelings and intentions which are in turn derived from interpretation of the work - a circularity that produces a history devoid of social explanation. (Pollock took up the point and developed it in an article in *Screen* on 'Artists, media and mythologies'.) Despite the difficulties of shifting from cinema as an object of study, *Screen* arguments about how representations work and produce pleasure, how they engage a (gendered) gaze, how women circulate as signs, and how psychoanalysis contributes to an understanding of
the divided subject (producer or spectator) were rich material, as the essays in *Vision and Difference* bear witness. What emerged was the need for a revisionist history of production and a theory of representation and subjectivity. With the first we could map the social and historical positions from which women had worked as artists, and the codes, conventions, and institutional opportunities available to them. With the second, we could analyse the contribution of representations of femininity to the production of feminine subjects, representations which nevertheless had no necessary relation to the referent ‘woman’ or the daily experience of women’s lives.

The collection opens with ‘Vision, voice and power’, lightly revised since its appearance in 1982, and with an increase in end-notes from 29 to 44 which could be considered an index of the vitality of recent feminist scholarship. It has the best misprint in the book (there aren’t many, it’s very well produced): ‘ideology is a process of basking contradictions’. But I regret the omission of a paragraph that had some force in the *Block* original, which stressed the ideological role of art as the embodiment of fulfilling, individualized creativity, the lived antithesis of proletarian labour, with, however, as ‘its full opposite . . .the repetitive and self-effacing drudgery of what is called “women’s work”’. And Pollock doesn’t acknowledge or concede the criticisms made by Ann Sutherland Harris after the publication of a version of the essay in the *Woman’s Art Journal* in 1983; these are reprinted with the article and Pollock’s response in Hilary Robinson (ed.), *Visibly Female* (London: Camden Press, 1987).

‘Modernity and the spaces of femininity’ is probably the most recent and for me the most illuminating essay in the book. New relations of gender and class were inscribed in the spaces of the modern city and the literature that celebrates it. The work of artists like Berthe Morisot, Mary Cassatt, or Gwen John has to be read against the grain of a concept and practice of modernity devised from the pleasures of the urban environment: ‘the socially fluid public world of the streets, popular entertainment and commercial or casual sexual exchange’. Pollock resists the temptation to write the neglected history of women’s contribution to impressionism as a stylistic category and insists on the modern city as a space of spectacle and promenade, the territory of the *flaneur*, in which the boundaries between public and private, men and women, women and ‘ladies’ were shifting and hardening. She asks ‘why the territory of modernism is so often a way of dealing with masculine sexuality and its sign, the bodies of women - why the nude, the brothel, the bar?’ And she engages in critical and productive dialogue with recent work on the Parisian geography of the ‘painting of modern life’, notably that by T. J. Clark and Theodore Reff. Her intention is to displace what she argues are ‘the limiting effects of such partial re-readings’, with the aim of revealing ‘how feminist materialist analysis handles not only the specific issues of women in cultural history but the central and commonly agreed problems’.

She does not displace their concern with class with her concern with gender but maps the spaces of femininity as they were classed - and as they intersected with the spaces of the masculine paterfamilias, citizen, client, or *flaneur* - exploring in particular the special territory of the avant-garde: ‘the interstitial
spaces, the spaces of ambiguity. . . of cross-class sexual exchange’. First she maps the spaces available to, and painted by, the women ‘impressionists’ (much more extensively than their male colleagues): private and domestic areas (houses, verandahs, gardens) or the permitted public spaces of bourgeois recreation and social ritual (promenades, theatres, parks, boating lakes). Then she discusses the organization of space in the paintings themselves (arguing a predilection for liminal spaces and condensed compositions). Finally, she turns to the question of the social spaces from which the representations were made and, reciprocally, the positions they offer a viewer (with the reordering of orthodox, perspectival space, the ‘gaze that is fixed on the represented figure is that of equal and like’ rather than that of a superior or voyeur).

Art history waxes eloquent on the artist, its central figure, but is reticent about the audience, either as an identifiable social group or as an individual viewing subject (there are notable exceptions in the work of Michael Baxandall, T. J. Clark, Thomas Crow, and John Barrell). We need to know more about how publics were constituted for art and what they expected art to do for them. In a different register, we have to determine the gratifications invoked in particular relations of looking as they contribute to the organization of sexuality and power. This is where film theory has been raided for its insights into gendered spectatorship, for more sophisticated formulations than John Berger’s polemical ‘men act and women appear’.

Work on fantasy has stressed the varied appropriations available to the viewer including those that cross the gender divide. The subject is liable to accept, reject, misread, or subvert the positions offered it by the text and find (or lose) a sense of itself in the process. But Pollock never allows this to lead to a state of ‘anything goes’, where historical and political questions of social constituencies with particular investments and expectations are dissolved in the endless tourism of the bisexual subject. In fact she is very acute in her observations on Manet’s Olympia and Bar at the Folies Berger-e, paintings that posit textually, as it were, a complicit male gaze. ‘How can a woman relate to the viewing positions proposed by either of these paintings? Can a woman be offered, in order to be denied, imaginary possession of Olympia or the barmaid? Would a woman of Manet’s class have a familiarity with either of these spaces and its exchanges which could be evoked so that the painting’s modernist job of negation and disruption could be effective. . . . Could [Berthe Morisot] as a woman experience modernity as Clark defines it at all?’ But at the same time, as she goes on to argue, isn’t part of the frisson of Olympia derived precisely from a recognition that the black maid, black cat, and brazen stare of Manet’s petite faubourienne will, in the Salon galleries, connect not with the figure of her potential client but with the blushing glance of his chaste bourgeoise?

The following essays take as their starting-point the work of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, but the titles indicate how far removed they are from conventional discussions of Pre-Raphaelite painting. ‘Woman as sign in Pre-Raphaelite literature: the representation of Elizabeth Siddall’ was written in collaboration with Deborah Cherry and first published in 1984. ‘Woman as sign: psychoanalytic readings’ had its origins, like the Siddall essay, in a 1975 paper
for the Association of Art Historians. They are linked by a two-page 'photo-essay', 'Signs of femininity', which juxtaposes Rossetti drawings of women in the Pre-Raphaelite circle with photographs of Garbo, Dietrich, and models in cosmetic advertisements, which Pollock suggests are their contemporary progeny.

The Siddall essay, written in part as a polemic during the Tate Gallery's exhibition of *The Pre-Raphaelites* in 1984, still has important points to make but looks less fluent here in contrast with the nuanced account of modernism that precedes it. Its principal argument - that Rossetti's obsessions as an artist cannot be explained biographically, but have to be understood as symptomatic of 'the renegotiation and redefinition of femininity and sexuality within the complex of social and gender relations of the 1850s' - is summarized at the beginning of 'Woman as sign', where it forms the basis for a psychoanalytical reading appropriate to a body of work 'remarkable for its repetitious preoccupation with woman and desire'.

Rossetti enthusiasts are usually compelled to connect his artistic output with the by-ways of his sexual and emotional entanglements, or in more formalist accounts to argue for his influence on symbolism as a way of linking the otherwise insular Pre-Raphaelites with the European avant-garde. In Pollock's argument, Rossetti's paintings of the 1860s and 1870s emerge as historically significant for quite astonishingly different reasons, providing 'a symptomatic site for the study of a new regime of representation of woman on the axis of bourgeois realism and erotic fantasy'. She draws on the work of Laura Mulvey to argue that psychoanalytical theory can shift attention away from iconography, and on to 'the study of the process of the image, what is being done with it and what it is doing for its users'. In Pollock's view Rossetti's paintings - and she focuses particularly on *Astarte Syriaca* of 1877 - pare away narrative and in the stylized idealization of their female subjects invoke a fetishistic gaze. Put crudely, the path leads from Rossetti to the 'frozen, unchanging "here" and "thenness"' of the glamour photograph or cinematic close-up; it isn't just that 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' happens to throw light on Rossetti, it's rather that the 'regime of representation' identified by Mulvey has its origins in this nineteenth-century moment.

The last essay - 'Screening the seventies: sexuality and representation in feminist practice - a Brechtian perspective' - takes its impetus from the exhibition *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* curated by Kate Linker (New Museum, New York 1984; ICA, London 1985). Pollock restates here in terms of a Brechtian, rather than a Lucaksian, realism, a position on contemporary feminist art practice for which - by artists who read her as prescriptive - she is sometimes attacked. Brecht provides the example of a critical, politicized modernism with which we can ward off the dangers of a depoliticized Museum of Modern Art formalism on the one hand, or the endless free-play of signifiers and subjectivities in a post-structuralist Disneyland on the other. Pollock is not much interested here in reception theory (she comes back to audiences later on). What she points to are the very limited tactical advantages of forms of documentary production devoted to the surface of women's lives and histories - 'the desire to make visible could not of
itself produce knowledge . . . feminist artists concerned to explicate the character of women's oppression within classed and racially divided patriarchal societies cannot be content to describe its appearances and symptoms' - and the significance of Brechtian analyses and devices in the radical art practices of selected feminist artists: Margaret Harrison, Kay Hunt, Mary Kelly (Women and Work exhibition 1975); Kelly's Post-Partum Document (1973-9); work by Mitra Tabrizian, Yve Lomax, and Marie Yates for exhibitions in 1983 and 1985; and Kelly's current project, Interim. She returns to Brecht via Sylvia Harvey's article on 'Whose Brecht? Memories for the eighties' (1982), arguing for an art that will meet Brecht's definition of pleasure as encompassing both entertainment and the pleasure of making new sense of the world. This makes Interim, a rigorously intelligent but pleasurable work, an appropriate (if, for some, predictable) point at which to close the essay and the book.

I do have a few criticisms. The longest essays are those on 'Modernity and the spaces of femininity' and 'Screening the seventies', but a third of the book is taken up with the sections on Pre-Raphaelitism which might have been reduced. There is some overlap between the introduction and the opening essay, and I miss some of the grubby-fingered archival work that has illuminated material by Pollock elsewhere. The different dates and locations of the earlier pieces require small changes of gear between sections. Mostly the writing is lucid and exact; occasionally it is acerbic, didactic, or obscure. These are the sorts of comments reviewers make as they feel the need to be seen to have reviewed. The important point is that Pollock has been for a decade our most consistent, prolific, uncompromising, and illuminating guide to the choppy waters of feminist art history and cultural analysis - provocative, argumentative, controversial, and absolutely indispensable.