

TheFeministArtProject

<http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>

Participate ...

The Feminist Art Project invites you to participate in activities that celebrate women's contributions to art and the Feminist Art Movement. Our purpose is to bring public attention to women's significant impact on contemporary art practice, highlighting their international influence, and guaranteeing their inclusion in the cultural record, past, present, and future.

Starting in 2006, museums, universities, and other institutions nationally are commemorating historic anniversaries in the American Women's Art Movement of the 1970s and launching new initiatives that demonstrate the ongoing significance of women's contributions to art. Please join this celebration by mounting activities that support this mission.

Our national and regional committees are gathering information on activities and conducting a nationwide campaign to publicize all programs related to the mission of The Feminist Art Project. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is facilitating regional meetings, publicity and a national website. Our goal is to list all events already planned and others that will be initiated in response to the project. Complete the Call for Participation online at <http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>.

Historic anniversaries in 2007

35th anniversary of A.I.R. Gallery, New York

35th anniversary of the First National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art

35th anniversary of the Feminist Art Program at California Institute of the Arts and *Womanhouse*, facilitated by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro

35th anniversary of the Woman's Building, Los Angeles

35th anniversary of the Women's Caucus for Art at the College Art Association

20th anniversary of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC

Recognizing feminist art, 2006-2008

2006 *How American Women Artists Invented Postmodernism 1970-1975*, curated by Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, Mason Gross School of the Arts Galleries at Rutgers, and traveling throughout New Jersey

2007 Opening of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum which will include the permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*

Global Feminisms at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and throughout the Brooklyn Museum, curated by Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly

WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Connie Butler, opening at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and traveling to the National Museum of Women in the Arts and P.S. 1, New York

2008 *A Group of One's Own: Women's Visual Art Organizations in the United States*, curated by Jeffrey Wechsler, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers

TheFeministArtProject

"Recognizing the aesthetic and intellectual impact of women on the visual arts and culture."

The Feminist Art Project National Coordinating Committee: Judith K. Brodsky and Ferris Olin, Institute for Women and Art at Rutgers; Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower*; Leslie King-Hammond, Maryland Institute College of Art; Dena Muller, A.I.R. Gallery and WCA; Arlene Raven (1944-2006); Maura Reilly, Brooklyn Museum; Susan Fisher Sterling, NMWA. Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is facilitating regional meetings, publicity, and the project Web site.



ELIZABETH A. SACKLER
CENTER FOR FEMINIST ART

ARTTABLE

NATIONAL MUSEUM
of WOMEN in the ARTS

CAA

mica

A.I.R. GALLERY

WCA
Women's
Caucus
for
ART



WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

FALL / WINTER 2006 VOLUME 27, NUMBER 2 \$12.00





(on the cover):
Alice Neel, *Mary D. Garrard* (1977),
oil on canvas, 33 1/4" x 29 1/4".
Private collection.

EDITORS

JOAN MARTER AND MARGARET BARLOW

BOOK EDITOR: UTE TELLINI

FOUNDING EDITOR: ELSA HONIG FINE

EDITORIAL BOARD

NORMA BROUDE	NANCY MOWLL MATHEWS
THERESE DOLAN	MARTIN ROSENBERG
MARY D. GARRARD	PAMELA H. SIMPSON
SALOMON GRIMBERG	ROBERTA TARBELL
ANN SUTHERLAND HARRIS	JUDITH ZILCZER
ELLEN G. LANDAU	

PRODUCTION, AND DESIGN SERVICES

OLD CITY PUBLISHING, INC.

Editorial Offices:

Woman's Art Journal
Rutgers University
Dept. of Art History, Voorhees Hall
71 Hamilton Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA
Phone (732) 932-7041 ext.20
Fax (732) 932-1261
waj@womansartjournal.org

Advertising and Subscriptions:

Ian Mellanby
Old City Publishing, Inc.
628 North Second St.
Philadelphia, PA 19123, USA
Phone: +1.215.925.4390
Fax: +1.215.925.4371
info@oldcitypublishing.com
www.oldcitypublishing.com

© 2006 Rutgers University, Department of Art History and
Old City Publishing, Inc.,

Woman's Art Journal (ISSN 0270-7993.) is published semiannually,
Spring/Summer and Fall/Winter by Old City Publishing, Inc., a
member of the Old City Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Subscription rates \$24.00 per year for individuals and \$52.00 per year
for institutions. Issues are shipped in May and November. Missed
issues must be reported no later than three months after shipping date
or we cannot be responsible for replacements. All rights reserved.

Indexed in Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA), Art Bibliogra-
phies Modern, Arts and Humanities Citation Index (ISI) and Wilson
Full Text. The full text is also available through JSTOR's Arts &
Sciences III Collection, www.jstor.org.

Except as permitted under national laws or under the photocopy license
described below, no part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, pho-
tocopying or otherwise, or stored in a retrieval system of any nature,
without the advance written permission of the publisher.

Rights and Permissions/Reprints of Individual Articles

This publication and each of the articles contained herein are protected
by copyright. Permission to reproduce and /or translate material con-
tained in this journal must be obtained in writing from the publisher.

For permission to photocopy for internal use within your organization,
or to make copies for external or academic use please contact the
Copyright Clearance Center at 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA
01923, USA; telephone: +1 978-750-8400 or online at <http://www.copyright.com/>.

Any unauthorized reproduction, transmission, or storage may result
in civil or criminal liability.

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

FALL / WINTER 2006 VOLUME 27, NUMBER 2

2 PARALLEL PERSPECTIVES

By Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow

PORTTRAITS, ISSUES AND INSIGHTS

3 ALICE NEEL AND ME

By Mary D. Garrard

8 ALICE NEEL'S WOMEN FROM THE 1970S: BACKLASH TO FAST FORWARD

By Pamela Allara

12 ALICE NEEL AS AN ABSTRACT PAINTER

By Mira Schor

17 REVISITING WOMANHOUSE: WELCOME TO THE (DECONSTRUCTED) DOLLHOUSE

By Temma Balducci

24 NANCY SPERO'S MUSEUM INCURSIONS: ISIS ON THE THRESHOLD

By Deborah Frizzell

REVIEWS

33 Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism

EDITED BY NORMA BROUDE AND MARY D. GARRARD

Reviewed by Ute L. Tellini

37 The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine De Pizan's Renaissance Legacy

BY SUSAN GROAG BELL Reviewed by Laura Rinaldi Dufresne

40 Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel

EDITED BY JORDANA POMEROY Reviewed by Alicia Craig Faxon

41 Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt

BY SALLY WEBSTER Reviewed by Caroline I. Harris

44 Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent

EDITED BY HOLLY PYNE CONNOR Reviewed by Donna Gustafson

47 Framing Women

EDITED BY SANDRA CARROLL, BIRGIT PRETZSCH AND PETER WAGNER Reviewed by Melissa Percival

49 Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné

BY BARBARA BUHLER LYNES Reviewed by Sascha Scott

51 Women Potters, Transforming Traditions

BY BRUCE ADAMS

Magdalene Odundo EDITED BY ANTHONY SLAYTER-RALPH

Reviewed by Pamela H. Simpson

54 Wild Girls—Paris, Sappho & Art: The Lives & Loves of Natalie Barney & Romaine Brooks

BY DIANA SOUHAMI Reviewed by Cassandra Langer

56 My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator

BY KATHARINE KUH Reviewed by Karen Bearor

59 Tina Modotti & Edward Weston: The Mexico Years

BY SARAH M. LOWE

Tina Modotti BY MARGARET HOOKS Reviewed by Robin Rice

62 Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994

EDITED BY MARION ARNOLD AND BRENDA SCHMAHMANN

Reviewed by Elizabeth Rankin

65 Dialogues: Women Artists From Ireland

BY KATY DEEPWELL Reviewed by Patricia Briggs

While planning this Fall/Winter issue, we were aware that this is a special moment for commemorating the history of the feminist art movement. This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of the groundbreaking exhibition "*Women Artists 1550-1950*," co-curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin. Also Douglass College at Rutgers University is celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary of its Women Artists Series, which created early solo exhibition opportunities for women artists. Next March, The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which will house a permanent installation of Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, opens at the Brooklyn Museum with "*Global Feminisms*," an international exhibition of contemporary women artists. Among other museum offerings across the country will be the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles's "*Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*." With this issue, we intend to contribute to this celebration of feminist art.

Mary Garrard is one of the outstanding scholars who helped bring feminist methodologies to art history. In addition to her groundbreaking books on Renaissance and Baroque topics, she and Norma Broude have assembled several anthologies of feminist scholarship, the latest of which, *Reclaiming Female Agency*, "focuses on women who have exercised agency as artists, patrons, viewers, and tastemakers," writes reviewer Ute Tellini. In a more unusual role—as a portrait subject—Garrard graces our cover, as an accompaniment to her fascinating account of having Alice Neel paint her portrait. A cluster of articles on Neel also features essays by Pamela Allara, who argues that "Neel was more radical in questioning ... 'what is a woman' than many feminists in the early 1970s," and Mira Schor, who documents her belief that Neel "is a great abstract painter!" The articles are based on presentations last year for a Neel symposium at the National Museum of Women in the Arts. Neel "lived by her feminism," writes Garrard, "by her insistent nose-thumbing of convention and her outlandish defiance of rules for women."

In the beginning, there was *Womanhouse*, and Temma Balducci describes ways in which this revolutionary 1972 California project "helped lay the groundwork for the exploration of gender construction through parody and exaggeration that continues to be important for feminist art." Change was in the air on the East Coast as well, thanks to artist-activists like Nancy Spero, and according to Deborah Frizzell, the archetypal images in Spero's 2003 *Hymn to Isis* project continue themes that the artist originated in the early 1970s. She describes how Spero "mined the full range of power relations as depicted in centuries of patriarchal representations of women set against a foreground of transformed, ancient matriarchal symbols."

Many names reappear throughout this issue chronicling the numerous interconnections among feminist artists and scholars. Mentioned often is the prolific and influential art historian Arlene Raven, whose death at age 62 in early August saddened several generations of feminists who relied on her incisive critical writings and passionate support for the causes of women artists.

Our large crop of reviews reflects the wide range of recent publications that confirm feminist thinking is no recent invention. Six hundred years ago, Christine de Pizan was celebrating the accomplishments of women in her *City of Ladies*,

and reviewer Laura Dufresne Rinaldi calls Susan Groag Bell's account of her search for remnants of the tapestries based on that 1405 book "as exciting as a good mystery novel."

Jordana Pomeroy's *Intrepid Women: Victorian Women Travel* describes how nineteenth-century women writers and artists "overturned stereotypes of timidity, domesticity and limited opportunities for their sex," writes reviewer Alicia Craig Faxon. These adventurers exemplified the spirit of the New Woman, whose image as recorded by leading male artists is the subject of an exhibition and catalogue prepared by Holly Pyne O'Connor and reviewed here by Donna Gustafson. Reviewer Caroline Harris observes that Sally Webster, in her book on Mary Cassatt's *Modern Woman* mural for the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, points out how the artist—not known for her feminist views—apparently comments on women's education by subverting the traditional story of Eve's temptation to portray the generous sharing of knowledge among women. The shifting ways in which women are defined, or "framed," in particular during two radically different periods—the Enlightenment and Postmodernist—are discussed by Melissa Percival in her review of *Framing Women*, a collection of essays.

The recent Georgia O'Keeffe catalogue raisonné, prepared by Barbara Buhler Lynes, is notable for maintaining its focus on the art, rather than the life, of this American legend, writes reviewer Sascha Scott. In looking back on her own interesting life in *My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator*, Katharine Kuh "enlists the reader as a watercooler confidant" as she details her experiences with famous artists and "breathes life into our mental images of them," writes reviewer Karen Bearor. Diana Souhami's account of the decidedly "Wild Girls" on the other side of the Atlantic that gathered in Paris around Natalie Barney and Romaine Brooks during the interwar years is reviewed by Cassandra Langer.

Pamela Simpson looks at three books on women pottery makers that could not be more diverse: Moira Vincentelli's world tour of women potters; Bruce Adams's monumental study of Cubist ceramic artist Anne Dangar; and Anthony Slayter-Ralph's monograph featuring the sensational contemporary work of Magdalene Odundo. The brief but brilliant career of the photographer Tina Modotti is illuminated in two volumes reviewed by Robin Rice.

Two surveys round out the reviews. Elizabeth Rankin discusses *Between Union and Liberation: Women in South Africa 1910-1994*, a collection of essays edited by Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmahmann from a postmodern, postapartheid perspective. Finally, Patricia Briggs reviews *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland*, in which Katy Deepwell records and illustrates her in-depth interviews with sixteen artists whose progressive work in the 1990s broke with the traditional "romantic stereotypes of Irishness."

We have been encouraged by your reception of the "new" *Woman's Art Journal*, and we extend our thanks to our authors, reviewers and subscribers for your continued support.

Joan Marter and Margaret Barlow

ALICE NEEL AND ME

By Mary D. Garrard

In the winter of 1977, Alice Neel painted me (front cover). When I came to her apartment and studio on West 107th Street in New York, I walked in the door, fresh from the cold, snowy street, and before I could take off my coat and hat, she said, "Stop, I want to paint you just like that." But I was not one of Neel's chosen victims—the portrait came about as a convergence of two factors.

In 1977, I was just ending my term as the second president of Women's Caucus for Art (WCA), the national organization of women in the visual arts.¹ In a photograph of an early conference meeting I am accompanied by WCA officers Diane Russell, Claire Sherman, Ellouise Schoettler and Norma Broude. At that time, I knew Norma only as another WCA leader who had recently joined my university's art department. We began our life together as collaborators and partners soon after the Neel portrait was painted. In the larger theater of feminist activism, Norma and I had come to know a lot of artists and other feminists who would become nationally prominent. One of them was Alice Neel (1900-84), newly famous but grandly so. Two years later, she would be honored at President Jimmy Carter's White House, along with Louise Nevelson (1899-1988), Selma Burke (1900-95), Isabel Bishop (1902-88), Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), and Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986), in the WCA's first annual awards ceremony. The White House event was instigated by Ellouise Schoettler and Norma Broude, and carried out by Judy Brodsky, my successor as WCA president, and Washington artist Charlotte Robinson.

I first met Neel at a party at Charlotte Robinson's house in Falls Church, Virginia. As I sat talking to her, a wicked thought came into my head—and this is the second factor. For years, my mother had wanted to have my portrait painted. She would pay for it, she said, but would leave it to me to find a suitable artist. For years, I had demurred, protesting that no good modern artists painted portraits—wouldn't she be just as happy with a nice photograph? I had resisted even the nice photograph, because I feared that what my mother wanted was something like this picture of me as a sixteen-year old Southern debutante (Fig. 1). I was socially constructed to look like that, of course—something I knew at the time without the words to explain it. Inside, I still imagined myself more like I looked in an early scrapbook photo (Fig. 2), a pre-feminine person, natural and uninhibited. The point is that when Alice Neel painted me, at age forty, I had no viable adult self-image. Between the imposed artificial Southern femininity, which distorted the more complex nature of my identity as a southerner, and the visually inchoate life I currently led as a university professor and urban feminist lay unfathomed parts of me. But having found no way to reconcile where I came from

with what I had become, I simply could not imagine a portrait that would not falsify at least half my identity.

The portrait project was cold on the back burner until I met Alice. Here was an artist who had for decades been painting portraits that were both realist *and* modernist. "Do you take commissions?" I asked. "Oh, yes," she said, and named a price, which was modest enough for me to propose to the patron, Lucile Clark Garrard. My poor mother didn't know what she was in for, but she trusted me, and the project was set.

When she first saw the portrait, my mother hated it. For a long time, Norma was the only one who liked it, recognizing in it what she calls my intensity and centeredness. In her book on Alice Neel, Pamela Allara labeled this image "the militant feminist activist," and perhaps that's what my mother saw in it too. I think in time she would have come to understand it, because she would surely have been a feminist if she'd known how. Indeed, the very idea of her requesting my portrait might be counted a feminist gesture because, I realized much later, she might have wanted to offset my father's board-room style portrait hanging in their living room. But as it happened, my mother would become ill and die within a year, at a moment when she was as troubled about what I was doing with my life as about the portrait.

As photographs of the 1970s demonstrate, such as one showing Lucy Lippard picketing at the Whitney, I didn't look different from others in my world. Alice Neel saw me in the uniform of the day, and, ever alert to the fit and misfit between individuals and types, said, "I want to paint you like that." Nancy Neel, her daughter-in-law and studio assistant, took me aside and whispered, "You don't have to wear the coat and hat, you know. Since this is a commission, you can have it however you want." The art historian in me took only an instant to respond: "I want her to do her own idea. I want an Alice Neel." Whatever that turned out to be, at least it would set the debutante to rest.

As she painted, Alice carried on a dramatic monologue. She would raise topics for conversation, only to close them off with door-slamming pronouncements of her own firm convictions. I wish I could quote the marvelous *bon mots* that flew by, the witty and acerbic throwaway remarks, but unfortunately I didn't write any of them down afterward. I assumed I'd remember them forever, just as I assumed that that magical moment in time would last forever: 1970s America, when astounding new things seemed possible for women. There were perhaps four sessions, three to four hours each. We'd break for lunch in the kitchen, where Nancy provided wonderful hot soup in earthy mugs, with chunks of bread and cheese. Then, back to the studio, where Alice continued to paint, talking



Fig. 1. Mary Garrard, age 16, Mississippi Delta.



Fig. 2. Mary Garrard, age about 3, Indianola, Mississippi.

incessantly. She did this partly to draw her sitters out on topics she knew they cared about, or to provoke reactions. But I think she also wanted to keep her conscious mind engaged in talk so that the artistic subconscious could do its work.

Neel's particular gambit was to discover and expose in her sitters the very things they would rather keep private. Evidently, she asked lots of sitters in the sixties and seventies if she could paint them nude; some agreed, some didn't. She said it was a test of wills, hers versus the sitter's. Cindy Nemser, the founder and editor of the *Feminist Art Journal*, a major publication of the 1970s (along with her very supportive husband Chuck) (1975; Pl. 1) must have thought she could take it, and I thought she was very brave. When Alice asked if she could paint me in the coat and hat, it may have been a test, on the order of being asked to pose nude. But nudity as Neel painted it—as many artists paint it—is not particularly personal. Would you recognize this woman from her body alone? Nudity is effectively a mask, because it conceals social identity. Being depicted in your own clothes makes you more vulnerable, because it exposes your identity choices.

Early in the first sitting, Alice asked me if I were a lesbian. It was the first time, and perhaps the last, I had been directly quizzed about a sexual identity I embraced some twenty years earlier, and it made me quite uneasy. Describing my portrait, Pam Allara commented on its guarded nature, my protection of privacy. If I appear guarded, that was probably the reason. In one sense, Alice protected my right to that defensiveness by painting it. Yet she got at me through a backdoor reference. It was Norma Broude who first observed my portrait's resemblance to Matisse's 1906 *Young Sailor*—an analogy that for Alice may have preceded any idea of the feminist activist. My navy blue pea jacket and cap would have summoned up Matisse's famous painting to the art-history-savvy Neel, and—style apart—the analogy is striking. She probably considered it relevant on several levels, cross-gendered allusion being the foremost.

Where gender was concerned, Alice Neel liked to mix things up. The element of androgyny, visible in my portrait and others in her oeuvre, brings to my mind Romaine Brooks's well known portrait of her flamboyant, cross-dressing lesbian friend, Una,

Lady Troubridge (1924; Fig. 3). There is even a resemblance of style, in the satirical use of caricature, and the combination of a bright, hard-edged realism with modernist flattening. Much of Alice's imagery is intertextual, and plays knowingly with art history. Along with Sylvia Sleigh (b. 1916), she pioneered the inversion of gender categories: in her nude portrait of the art curator and critic John Perreault (1972), she depicted a gay man as an odalisque, invoking the long tradition of sexy female nudes like Goya's *Naked Maja* (1800). Perreault's dreamy passivity and lovingly detailed genitalia are meant to be understood as a send-up of the type—as effective a comic role reversal as Linda Nochlin's famous photograph of the Vassar College studio model she posed and photographed with bananas, playing off images of nude women with round fruit that were ubiquitous in art history.²

When Neel portrayed Linda Nochlin and another leading feminist art historian, Ann Sutherland Harris, she chose to show each accompanied by her child, Harris with her son Neil, and Nochlin with daughter Daisy (1973; Pl. 2). Here again Neel was mixing things up—in this case, playing against type by showing an arch feminist as mother. Yet her intent may have gone beyond an atypically kind wish to show feminists as well rounded people. Daisy's pose replicates Linda's; her left arm and hand mimic her mother's gesture, bringing to mind Mary Cassatt's (1844-1926) portrait of a mother and child who are also red-haired and blond, where the color yellow is also central, and linked gestures also connect mother and daughter (c. 1905; Fig. 4). Cassatt uses a mirror to evoke the future; in Neel's portrait, it is Daisy's hopeful face. Yet Alice astutely contrasts Daisy's energy and innocence with her mother's tempered experience—her face is open where Linda's is wary; her dangling legs signal expectancy, Linda's crossed legs convey mature self-protection. The portrait speaks of generational continuity and its revitalization—surely as applicable to feminism and its generational legacy as to individual families.

A photograph from the 1980 WCA conference captures the sense of generational continuity that was the pride and hope of second-wave feminists. Alice Neel and the influential museum curator Adelyn Breeskin are the elders, greeted respectfully by feminist icon Miriam Schapiro, some twenty-five years younger. In the background, fourteen years younger than Schapiro, I represent virtually a third generation. A scant decade earlier, Schapiro and Judy Chicago had broken the ice at *Womanhouse*, their now legendary experimental collaborative creation with their students at Cal Arts, which put feminist art on the national map. A photograph of that group includes a very young Mira Schor, an active feminist artist and writer (also a contributor to the Alice Neel symposium and to the essays in this issue). We believed that the next generation would carry on our feminist agenda, and Mira is a shining example of those who did. But some members of the *Womanhouse* project, like many other American women, now live "postfeminist" lives, content with the gains of a half-completed revolution. What we did not know then, in our optimistic expectation of a brave new world, is that feminist movements have never yet lasted two consecutive generations.

Alice Neel's own relationship to the feminist movement was complicated. Early on, she became its poster child—most notably when her portrait of Kate Millett on the August 1970

cover of *Time* magazine heralded the women's movement to the nation. Neel gave the movement a hero, as someone who acted out feminism but didn't necessarily speak out for it. Yet it was the feminist movement that "discovered" her, and launched her career. She became known to many of us at the first national conference on women in the visual arts, held at the Corcoran School of Art in Washington, in April 1972. It was a catalytic moment, when the vast nationwide feminist movement was in formation. Wonderful photographs taken by Ruth Ward catch the spirit of that moment. Judy Chicago was there, fresh from the triumph of *Womanhouse*. Linda Nochlin spoke, and June Wayne gave outdoor seminars. Middle-aged women caucused and planned, while young women—by far the largest cohort present—listened and changed their lives. One of those was Arlene Raven—now recently deceased—who left the East Coast for California on the spot, to launch her rich career as feminist critic and activist.

Sometime during the conference, a seventy-two-year-old woman few there had heard of took the podium, armed with carousels, and started showing slides of her work. She would not stop, hungry for attention, and with some forty years of her story to tell—finally, to an audience that would listen. She went on and on, and *still* she wouldn't stop, and had to be dragged from the stage. Then came her legendary, second performance. Impatient with the long lines at the ladies room, Alice simply lifted her skirts and let loose in a corridor of the Corcoran. With this aggressive, outrageous behavior, Alice Neel showed us what it might mean to be *really* free of "feminine" constraints. Her action took on a masculinist edge, reminding everyone of Jackson Pollock's drunken urinations in the fireplace. There were as yet no models for how to be feminist without giving up femininity, so we all borrowed masculine gestalts and modes of behavior, as needed.

Alice Neel lived her feminism, by her insistent nose-thumbing of convention and her outlandish defiance of rules for women. But if she gave the movement a role model, the feminist movement gave her a context in which to be understood. She had labored forty years without recognition, first because she was a figurative painter in an era when abstraction was dominant, and second, because she was a woman. The feminist movement validated her in both respects. Obviously, it supported her as a woman, but it also validated her commitment to the specific and individual, as opposed to the mythic universals of abstract modernism. In an important article called "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," Linda Nochlin argued that women artists were subverting modernism, citing Neel's portraiture as case in point.³

Feminists also valued the wit and humor of Alice Neel's art, recognizing it as our own. Typical of feminism's mischievous irony was the famous *ArtNews* cover of October 1980, which satirized the dominant myth about gender and creativity with a wink at art history: the image was a large group of (feminist) women artists; the label was "Where Are All the Great Men Artists?" I have never understood how critics of the women's movement can get away with calling feminists grim and humorless "feminazis," considering that a typical feminist gathering of the seventies rang with laughter; its spirit was

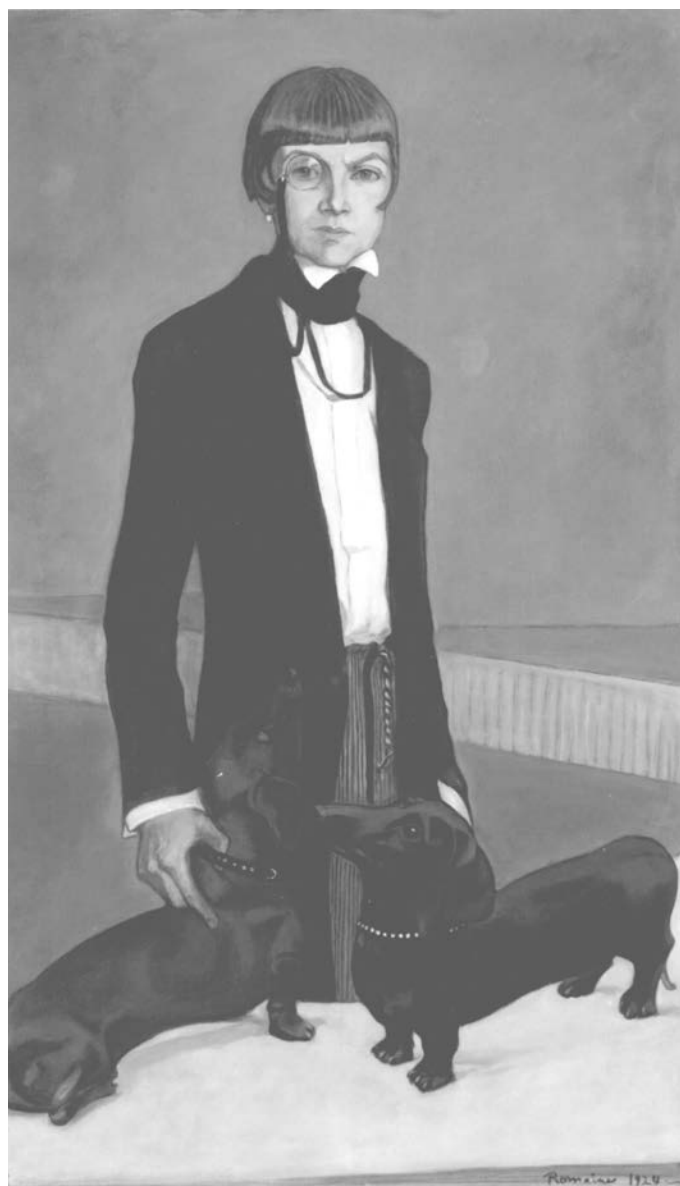


Fig. 3. Romaine Brooks, *Una, Lady Troubridge* (1924), oil on canvas, 50 1/8" x 30 1/8", Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Gift of the artist.

mirthful and playful. The political message of feminism was delivered, not by tanks and guns, but through artful and high-spirited parry and thrust, with tongues in cheek. The Guerrilla Girls had to get tougher in the '80s, yet their critique was grounded in '70s style humor and cultural play.

Yet Alice Neel's wit had a deeper dimension. Seeing the simultaneous (2005) retrospective exhibitions of Neel and Andy Warhol in Washington, D.C. led me to think that Neel was to Feminist art as Warhol was to Pop art—she both embodied it, and stood a bit apart from it. Like Warhol, she was a skeptic about humanity in general and American humanity in particular, which she skewered by selecting its salient features and pushing them to the absurd. Both had a dark side, which came out in the bright false cheer of its opposite. Each faced the *really bad* in life, yet



Fig. 4. Mary Cassatt, *Mother and Child* (c. 1905), oil on canvas, 36 1/4" x 29". Chester Dale Collection, Image © 2006 Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

refused to ennoble it as tragic. Each found a way to make the really bad endurable, softening reality through style.

When Alice Neel turned eighty, she evidently decided it was time to take on art history again. In her nude self-portrait (1980; Pl. 3), she breaks at least three conventions of artistic tradition. One is that the female nude presents women as objects of the male gaze. As if to redeem the Naked Majas of art history, Neel rises upright, trailing *pentimenti*, defiantly proclaiming the nude's right to come to life and fight back. Next, this naked old woman escapes the critical gaze through irony: she wields a paintbrush, the tool that artists like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner strategically positioned at the groin when painting themselves, forging metaphoric links between pen and penis, brush and penis, to reify the machismo of art. Well, you might say, Neel's brush is not really phallic, it's rather demure, lying in the crook of her arm. But, wait! Artistic virility has not been omitted, merely artfully and cleverly transferred to the big toe of the painter's right foot. As the foot arches up, the toe's erection sets the painting's curves into rhyme, pulling the lumpen shapes of a sagging, aging body into aesthetic harmonies of pure design.

The third taboo is that old women are not fit subjects for art. Rembrandt presented himself as a tragic figure, stoic and heroic in face of life's hardships. As his face crumbled into old age, he

preserved his dignity through fine clothes and fine art. Neel parodies this ponderous notion of dignity by taking away its defenses. Stripping her own dignity away entirely, exposing all, she dissolves us in laughter where Rembrandt would dissolve us in tears. One might apply to Neel's self-portrait what she once said about her sitters: in unconsciously assuming their most characteristic poses, they reveal "what the world has done to them and their retaliation."⁴ The nude self-portrait might be seen as Neel's retaliation—to the art world, to art history and its woes. Yet it's not a bitter picture; rather, it's a playful affirmation of the absurdity of the human condition, localized in the life experiences of a female artist. The theme of all her portraits is the self and its defenses, the self and its dreams. Her face speaks of defenses, of wisdom gained from hard knocks. But her body—naked in the now, and nude in the historical imaginary—expands without restraint in that famous blue-and-white striped chair. Significantly, it is *broader* here than in other portraits, expanding laterally into a throne.

I would situate Neel's noted ambivalence about feminism in similar terms. "Sisterhood!" she once exclaimed, "why there's nothing more competitive than the women's movement." But this wasn't a putdown of feminism, for she concluded, "It just shows the competitiveness of American life."⁵ In this Rabelaisian take on the human condition, women, in their full and often self-contradictory humanity, can represent American life as well as men. Neel saw women's lib in the larger context of human lib, and when she called herself a humanist, she spoke as a woman, on behalf of a humanity that could also include men.

Mentioning that blue-and-white striped chair brings me back to Alice Neel and me. Looking at my portrait, the artist Athena Tacha noted a slight resemblance between Alice and myself, in our coloring and physiognomy. One could explain this by quoting Cosimo de' Medici, that "every artist paints himself." Or by a related topos of portraiture, that the artist steals the sitter's identity for herself to keep. Thus, Romaine Brooks was called the "thief of souls," and Alice Neel described herself as a "collector of souls." Yet an alternative perspective is to think of portraits as collaborations between artist and sitter. When one person paints another, a mysterious exchange takes place, in which giving and taking can be more mixed up. Neel once said, "The persons themselves dictate to a certain extent the way they are done—if they are very liberated people, I in turn feel very liberated and can paint them in a more liberated way."⁶

I doubt that I was Alice Neel's liberated ideal, but I may well have projected qualities that corresponded to something in her, which she took as a challenge. In confronting me with more of my identity than I wished at the time to share, she may have pushed me to be a bit more open, though at first it was by way of confronting her back. The portrait has a bit of that in it—a little, "how dare you?," and a little, "what of it?" In her eyes, I'm more rakish than I think of myself as being—she gives that hat a life of its own (it was actually rather flat). The red scarf says I'm a little more passionate, and the gaze says I'm a little more aggressive. In each of us, there are suppressed and minimized parts of our personalities that sometimes need expressing. In pulling those out of me, Alice did me a favor. And in resisting her, I may have pushed her to make the portrait more complex.

When she looked at me, did she recognize a fellow Anglo-Saxon born into relative privilege who, like herself, had escaped oppressive social conformity to save herself from drowning, and wound up living unconventionally, liberated by a life in art? Did she see a girl whose mother had worried, as hers did, about her daughter's choices in life? Maybe not—though one should never underestimate Neel's amazing ability to penetrate a sitter instantly, and find meaning in purely visual cues. But I'd like to think that the hint of defiance in my face and confidence in my pose were inspired by Alice, found in me by her, and given back to my mother, by an artist who may have understood me better than either of us knew. ●

Mary D. Garrard, Professor Emerita of Art History, American University, is the author of two books on Artemisia Gentileschi (1989 and 2001), and numerous studies in Renaissance and Baroque art history, to which she has brought a feminist perspective. With Norma Broude, she edited and contributed to four volumes of collected essays in feminist art history that have become basic texts in American universities.

NOTES

1. This article is adapted from my talk at the Alice Neel Symposium at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C. [NMWA] on November 19, 2005. Some of the photographs I showed at the Neel symposium are reproduced in Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Abrams, 1994).
2. See Thomas B. Hess and Linda Nochlin, eds., *Woman as Sex Object: Studies in Erotic Art, 1730-1970* (New York: Newsweek, Inc. 1972), p. 13.
3. Linda Nochlin, "The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law," *Art in America* 61 (1973), 54-61 and 96-103.
4. Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 189-90.
5. From an interview of 1975, reported by Pamela Allara, *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998), 191.
6. *Alice Neel: Black and White*, exh. cat., February 14 – March 30, 2002 (New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2002), opp. plate 48.

Take the Opportunity to Subscribe Now.

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

Woman's Art Journal • ISSN 0270 7993 (print)
Volume 28, Issues 1-2 (64 pages/issue, 8.5" x 11")

For back issues, e-mail:
info@oldcitypublishing.com

Institutional North America* ☐ US \$58 Institutional Overseas ☐ US\$ 75 ☐ Euro 62 ☐ Yen ¥8,388
Individual North America* ☐ US \$26 Individual* Overseas ☐ US\$32 ☐ Euro 27 ☐ Yen ¥3,803

* Individual rate eligibility: must be for individual use only, sent to a home residential address and paid for by a personal check or credit card of the individual.

To Subscribe, write or fax: **Old City Publishing**, 628 North 2nd St., Phila., PA 19123 USA
Tel.: +1.215.925.4390 • Fax: +1.215.925.4371 • www.oldcitypublishing.com

Ship to:

Bill to:

Credit Card: ☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard No. _____

Exp. date _____ Signature _____

Please make checks payable to:
Old City Publishing, Inc.

ALICE NEEL'S WOMEN FROM THE 1970s

Backlash to Fast Forward

By Pamela Allara

When criticized during the Depression by her fellow radical intellectuals for painting portraits rather than 'the masses,' Alice Neel (1900-84) responded, "One plus one plus one is a crowd."¹ It is worth considering what she meant by that statement. The majority of Neel's portraits are indeed of individuals, but Neel did not share modernism's cult of individuality. As an unrepentant (if erratic) Communist, she thought in terms of the individual's relation to society as a whole, and only rarely, in bald caricatures such as the suburban art mavens *Irene and Eva* (1972), did she depict her sitters as mindless social constructs. Rather, the members of her "American Portrait Gallery"² were included less as types than as random samples for investigation. Literally sitting at the conjunction of often conflicting forces: social, psychological, political and biological, each depicted individual fits multiple categories: gender, race, age, sexual orientation, class, profession, belief system. In deciding how to balance her sitter's multiple attributes, Neel described her task as the visual summary of "what the world has done to them and their retaliation." The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has used the more academic term 'habitus' (or social education) to define personality: "...the inscription of social power relationships on the body...at once produced and expressed through our movements, gestures, facial expressions, manners, ways of walking, and ways of looking at the world."³ It is no small measure of Neel's achievement as an artist that she was able to consistently translate each sitter's habitus into paint.

With some justification, therefore, Neel has been characterized as a sort of artist-sociologist who revived and redirected the dying genre of ameliorative portraiture by merging objectivity with subjectivity, realism with expressionism. In visually interpreting a person's habitus, Neel understood that she could not be an objective observer, that her depictions would of necessity include her own response. Her portraits do not so much reveal a personality or a 'unique self,' as provide a record of an encounter or conversation. Like the anthropologist/sociologist Sara Lawrence Lightfoot, who described her educational research as "the art of portraiture," Neel positions her sitters in relation to her own changing situation. Her approach to portraiture as a quasi-sociological investigation requires, in the end, that the individual take her

place among the group, to be seen as part of an era (synchronically) and as persons evolving and changing over time (diachronically).

If there can be said to be a true alter ego among Neel's portraits, it surely must be that of Helen Merrell Lynd (1969), whose 1925 text, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*, revealed the cracks in America's foundational belief in the nuclear family.⁴ As represented by Neel, Lynd gazes steadily but with warmth at the viewer. Her right hand cupped over one ear, and her outsized other ear isolated by her facial contour, the sociologist/researcher is presented as a person who *hears*. A pioneering academic, Lynd published her breakthrough study just as Neel was beginning her own career, and some forty years later Neel depicted her as a professional role model: a picture of fairness, intelligence and independent judgment. Lynd is presented as highly skilled in a talent traditionally cultivated in females: the ability to listen. The relationship between them, at bottom, rests on Neel's comparable skill—the ability to *see*.

Interestingly, all of the literature with which I am familiar, including my own, discusses Neel's portraits singly and sequentially, leaving the 'findings' of her life long investigation inconclusive. So, she was not a sociologist after all? Clearly not. She was an artist who recognized the complexity of each personality she probed in her portraits, and so she left it up to sociologists and historians to draw generalizations. The fact that subsequent critics often interpret her portraits quite differently is evidence that her layering of paint in the faces and hands of her best portraits functioned to conjoin a complex range of attributes in her sitters. Just as her portraits are the record of an encounter between the artist and her subject, so our experience of her portraits demands that we bring our own beliefs, knowledge, and life experience to the interpretation of the person depicted. The viewer in all probability has known someone who gestures like that, or whose facial expression is similar—in sum, whose physiognomy and body language convey cues to a type we know or have known, and which permits an imaginary communication with a painted stranger.

To reiterate, Neel's portraits remain important not only as records of a historical period, or as a cumulative sociological study, but as encounters. Contemporary Americans, living in a society that over the past quarter century has regressed to the

dog-eat-dog Darwinian capitalism Neel so deplored, appear to have lost any sense of the basics of living in a civil society—that is, the recognition of and respect for other human beings. Neel's portrait gallery demands the sort of human interaction we no longer experience when out in public, and provides an object lesson for the acknowledgment of the value of each person: in other words, egalitarian values lost in the oligarchy that has replaced American democracy. Neel was aware of this tectonic shift in American society, even though she did not live to see it brought to fruition in the Reagan-Bush-Bush era. As she told Patricia Hills when discussing her portrait of her son Richard (*Richard in the Era of the Corporation*, 1979): "...only at the end, when I did Richard, did I know what the 1970s were about. The 1970s was when corporations took over."⁵

These preliminary thoughts about the contemporary relevance of Alice Neel's oeuvre have been stimulated by the exhibition, "Alice Neel: Women," organized by Carolyn Kinder Carr for the National Museum of Women in the Arts (October 28, 2005-January 15, 2006). This ambitious exhibition surveyed Neel's portraits of people gendered female, but neither the essay in the previously published book by Carr,⁶ nor the explanatory labels in the exhibition itself attempted to identify any coherent attributes to her portraits of women. This is understandable, but the lack of any feminist critical viewpoint in these texts was depressing evidence of just how thorough the backlash has been since Neel's death in 1984. Admittedly, although feminists have for decades avoided the academically poisonous term 'essentialism,' nonetheless, the visitor to an exhibition of portraits of women in a museum devoted to art by women may reasonably expect to leave with some concept of how 'woman' has been socially constructed over time.

Gender for Neel was always 'gender and...,' and she always took care to observe how persons gendered female negotiated that term. She read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* shortly after its publication in 1949, and agreed with the philosopher's well-known argument that one is not born, but becomes a woman. As de Beauvoir observed, "The body is not a thing, it is a situation..."⁷ By interpreting several of Neel's paintings from the era of second-wave feminism, noting the ways in which the artist brings gender into play, I will test the argument that Neel's portraits depict both situations and relationships.

Beginning in the 1960s, as second-wave feminism began to explore the question of difference, it became a challenge to tell the biological difference between male and female from people's day-to-day appearance. Back then, feminists signaled their challenge to the patriarchy by entering a man's world disguised in men's clothes. Neel gave her 1972 portrait of Irene Peslikis—the picture of 70s feminism in unisex garb, lack of make-up, and an expansive, masculine pose—the subtly demeaning title of *Marxist Girl* rather than "feminist woman." Neel was ambivalent about second-wave feminism, admiring its activism, but distrusting its white middle class origins and attitudes, which she justifiably believed obscured the ability to "...see politically and appraise the Third World." Writing in the communist journal, the *Daily World*, the year before painting this portrait, Neel argued that true liberation required a fundamental change in economic and social structures:

"[W]omen's real liberation cannot occur without some change in the social organization...Property relations which reduce everything to the status of 'things' and 'objects' have also reduced women to the status of 'sexual objects.'"⁸ Nonetheless, despite Neel's reservations about feminism, Peslikis, a co-founder of the *Feminist Art Journal* as well as *Redstockings* (later the Redstockings Women's Liberation Archives for Action), has a thoughtful, composed expression that recalls Lynd's. And although her unshaven armpit references the era's refusal of sexist ideals of female beauty, the "crude" armpit simultaneously recalls the overt sexuality of Matisse's *Odalisque* from 1923, as does her pose. So, the put-down, if that's what it is, is a gentle one. The oscillation between male and female engendered by Peslikis's pose may be a reminder on Neel's part not to conceive of liberation in exclusively masculinist, capitalist terms, or, on the other hand, a tongue-in-cheek reference to the sort of critique of the female sex object in modernist painting found in the essays in *Feminist Art Journal*. Peslikis's body is indeed a situation—that of second-wave feminist activism. When the image was chosen for the cover of the journal *Feminist Studies* in the summer of 2002, shortly after Peslikis's death at age 59, it served to pigeonhole her as a historical artifact; however, when viewed in the original, the scale of the painting permits the ambiguity and complexity of an encounter.

Neel readily acknowledged that her own career benefited from feminist activism, and she visually returned the favor with her monumental portrait of her daughter-in-law, Nancy Neel, in *Nancy and the Rubber Plant* (1975). Shortly after her marriage to Richard in 1963, Nancy left social work to devote herself to administering Neel's exhibition and lecture schedule. As they entered professions formerly closed to them, second-wave feminists commonly joked that they wished they had a wife. Nancy assumed that selfless task for Neel, and her support permitted Neel (and her work) to get "off the shelf" at last. As I wrote in 1998: "Seated in front of the towering house plant, Nancy's torso is like a lean trunk from which springs a syncopated canopy of dancing green leaves, a visualization of that vital, organic network to which Neel was connected through Nancy's tireless assistance."⁹ Peering through the leaves is Neel's 1940 caricature of WPA official Audrey McMahon, whose toothless visage references her inability to sustain Neel on public assistance during World War II. In contrast, a new generation of women has cultivated an explosive growth in Neel's artistic stature. Sadly, as Neel's later portraits of her daughter-in-law indicate, Nancy's own vitality was sapped in the process, as has happened to many a woman who adopts a subservient, 'wifely' role.

Second-wave feminism challenged gender roles, indeed the very meaning of gender itself, and the radical destabilization of sexual identity generated social fissures that remain with us today. Always aware of the instability of gender categories, Neel posed a challenge to middle-class, white, educated feminists' assumptions about women with her portraits of people on the sexual borderlands. *Jackie Curtis and Ritta Redd* (1970) portrays a couple, visually a heterosexual one, but with the terms male and female rendered incoherent. Jackie Curtis, on the right, has an ambiguous first name that could apply to either sex, and

although dressed as a female in skirt and blouse, s/he wears the pants, so to speak, in her aggressive pose. (Her painted toenail becomes phallic; as a writer recently noted, feet are the transvestite's kryptonite.) Ritta, in male garb, but flowing locks, is smaller, and leans (is dependent) on Jackie. Surrounded by a nimbus of grey, they occupy a grey zone where clothing and traditional gestures of power or subservience are no longer clear signals for biological sex. Rather, gender is performed.¹⁰ In a brilliant stroke, Neel locks together their feet, signaling not only the togetherness of the couple, but the duality of their genders as well: each is both male and female. Her later, commissioned portrait of the feminist art historian Mary D. Garrard (1977; front cover) might also be interpreted as a portrait in drag, with Garrard's horizontal, interlaced fingers serving much the same function as Curtis's and Redd's feet: an even balance between gender identities.¹¹

In the 1970s, when androgyny was briefly linked to the ideal of equality between the sexes, Neel explored the new constructions of gender emerging not just from the streets, but also from a more radical location, the underground, specifically Andy Warhol's factory, where Jackie and Ritta "worked." Her masterpiece, her 1970 portrait of Warhol, presents the ideal androgyne, the effeminate male, scarred, girded and, Catholic martyr that he was, floating on an airborne cloud/daybed/sarcophagus. (Perhaps, as he has both breasts and male trousers, he is best seen as a hermaphrodite.) Neel told her biographer Patricia Hills that she liked Andy, and here displayed great empathy for the plight of the gay male in American society. However, for obvious reasons, she disliked his portraits. Warhol understood that the corporate culture effacing democracy was a culture of celebrity rather than equality, and so he imaged that culture in all of its flatness and lack of affect. Neel continued to seek depth, clinging to her faith in the value of each person. Her sitters from the 1970s, with the exception of Warhol himself, tend to be second tier professionals, whose identity requires research on our part, and who have yet to be reduced to an image by fame. But Warhol himself hovers between the one realm and the other, just as he hovers between genders. As Naomi Schor has argued, "Stardom...is ghostly, a state of haunting."¹² Like Warhol, Neel understood that her success as an artist would require her to cultivate a star persona, and as with Warhol, that ruse was effective.

In sum, I want to argue that Neel was more radical in questioning the question of "what is a woman" than many feminists in the early 1970s. She did not see a conflict between gay and women's liberation, and in fact her radical revisions of the construct of "women" in her portraits of Warhol and his groupies are several years earlier than her portraits of feminist activists. As she commented: "I don't think we should fight each other...both men and women are wretched and often it's a matter of how much money you have rather than what your sex is."¹³ Arguably, Neel's portraits from the 1970s ignore her own advice; the poor blacks and Hispanics from her former neighborhood in Spanish Harlem vanish, and the non-whites who do appear, Faith Ringgold or Kanuthia, for example, are for the most part well-situated professionals. All of the sitters discussed here—the grandmotherly Lynd, the unisex Peslikis,

the administrator Nancy Neel, even the transvestite couple—aspire via very different routes to at least the appearance of middle-class rectitude and professional achievement. Viewed synchronically, then, the 1970s can appear as a time of equal opportunity: the middle-class as an open tent. However, viewed diachronically, a conversation with these portraits from our contemporary position throws light on just how distant that era was. Three years after Neel's death, Allan Bloom published *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), an early neoconservative salvo against multiculturalism. According to the summary (and rebuttal) by Lawrence W. Levine, Bloom argued "...that the student, feminist and Black power movements of the 1960s and 1970s had resulted in the 'democratization of the university' which led to 'the collapse of the entire American educational structure.' He compared the New Left to Nazi Youth, the Woodstock concert to the Nuremberg Rally, and the professors who 'collaborated' with the American student movements to such supporters of Hitler as Martin Heidegger...."¹⁴

A carefully considered encounter with Neel's portraits from the 1970s shows a very different picture. The challenge that her work presents today is to construct a historical narrative that overwrites the falsehoods of conservatives such as Bloom, and imagines a route out of the 'Matrix-like' present. As a 1930s radical, and a beneficiary of the activist politics of the 1960s and 1970s, Neel surveyed the latter decade to construct a model of critique that exemplifies embodied thought and action, (as well as inevitable internal contradictions and fissures). Who would ever have thought that from our current perspective, the work of that quintessential bohemian, Alice Neel, would constitute an urgent call for the establishment of an economically and socially inclusive middle class though the emancipatory potential of a "politics of the imagination"?¹⁵ •

Pamela Allara is Associate Professor Emerita at Brandeis University. She is the author of *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery* (1998/2000). Her recent scholarship has been in the area of contemporary feminist activist art.

NOTES

This article is a version of my presentation at the Alice Neel Symposium at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., on November 19, 2005. The family of Alice Neel has refused permission to reproduce her paintings for this essay.

1. "Alice by Alice," in Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 53.
2. This is the subtitle of the monograph I wrote on Neel: *Pictures of People: Alice Neel's American Portrait Gallery*. (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1998/2000).
3. Quoted in Toril Moi, *What Is A Woman? And Other Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 282.
4. In discussing the rise of divorce, the Lynds wrote that the ideal of marriage conflicted with the reality of many Middletown homes. "The husband must 'support' his family, but...recurrent 'hard times' make support of their families periodically impossible...the wife must make a home for her husband and care for her children, but she is increasingly spending her days in gainful employment outside the home...affection between the two is regarded as the basis of marriage, but sometimes in the day-after-day struggles this seems to be a memory rather than a

present help." Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1925), 129. Quoted in Allara, *Pictures of People*, 42.

5. Hills, *Alice Neel*, 167.
6. Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Alice Neel's Women* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002).
7. Quoted in Toril Moi, *What is a Woman?*, 59.
8. Quoted in Allara, *Pictures of People*, 194.
9. "The Woman's Wing," in *Pictures of People*, 199.
10. The concept of gender as performed, as opposed to socially constructed, emerged from Queer Studies in the 1980s. As so often occurs, Neel's work is prescient.
11. See my *Pictures of People*, 211. I wrote that "Garrard's interlaced fingers speak of calm rationality and balance as well as of a defensive wall or barrier, of political equality as well as protection of privacy." Neel's record of Garrard's scholarly objectivity links this portrait to Helen Lynd's as well.

12. Naomi Schor, "Endpiece: Depression in the Nineties," in *Bad Objects: Essays Popular and Unpopular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 162.
13. Allara, *Pictures of People*, 201; from Cindy Nemser, *Art Talk: Conversations with Twelve Women Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 121.
14. Lawrence W. Levine, *The Opening of the American Mind: Canons, Culture and History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 6. After the publication of Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* in 1990, David Horowitz has been inspired to place 100 progressive academics on a list of people to be persecuted.
15. The term is Arjun Appadurai's. See Arjun Appadurai, ed. *Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).



Back issues of *Woman's Art Journal* are now available in JSTOR, the not-for-profit online digital archive. Interested users at libraries and institutions that participate in JSTOR's Arts & Sciences III collection will now be able to browse, search, view and download the full-text pdf articles of all journal content from the first issue in 1980 up until and excluding the most recent three years.

Information regarding
JSTOR is available at:

<http://www.jstor.org>



Now in Paperback

THE ARTEMISIA FILES

Artemisia Gentileschi for Feminists and
Other Thinking People

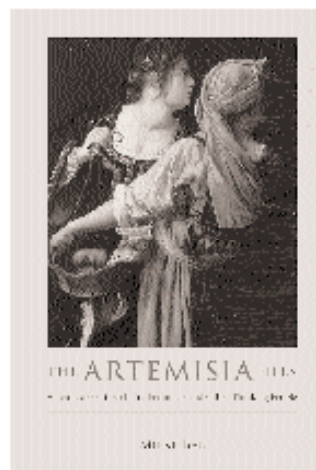
Edited by Mieke Bal

"The *Artemisia Files* makes an important contribution to the current debates surrounding Artemisia Gentileschi . . . It brings together a group of noted scholars whose work has energized and charged the entire discipline of art history."

—MAKAR SHREVE, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

"In this exceptional collection of essays, art historians prominent in the fields of Gentileschi research set the record straight, presenting a profile of the artist that reaches beyond their usual readership of art enthusiasts to define this 17th-century painter for a wider audience. . . . A vigorous attempt to extricate Artemisia the painter from Artemisia the myth."

—MICHELLE HUNTER, *NYC*



245 p., 44 halftones Paper \$18.00



The University of Chicago Press www.press.uchicago.edu

ALICE NEEL AS AN ABSTRACT PAINTER

By Mira Schor

Representation and most specifically figuration have in general proved more useful than abstraction to those wishing to use visual art to discuss gender difference and feminist issues in visual art. Feminist content has been easier to perceive when iconographic analyses of representation and image-based narratives can be brought to bear on the work. Consequently, much to the dismay of women working in abstraction who consider themselves feminists, they are often not included in exhibitions and panel discussions on feminism and gender representation. Conversely, exhibitions or panels on abstraction rarely include women who refer to feminism as a significant factor in their work.

The problematics of considering women artists' work in abstraction are ensnared in the subtext of the ideals of abstraction as a universal, ergo genderless, language, in the hyper-masculinist rhetoric of the New York School, and in the dangers of essentialism lurking in any efforts to perceive difference in the work of abstract artists who are women. It is perhaps because of these pitfalls that I wish to consider the work of Alice Neel (1900-84), from a formalist and also process/materialist-oriented point of view, as a great abstract painter, against the grain of the importance of her work in terms of the visual articulation of a female gaze and also against the grain of her own self-presentation, rooted in autobiography and anecdote.

It has been widely noted by feminist art historians that women artists faced a double problem with regard to painting in the postwar years leading up to the development of the feminist art movement at the end of the 1960s. The utopian ideals of pure abstraction had allowed women artists some kind of entrée into art, since a truly universalist art practice would be gender free; to this day, many women who are successful abstract painters have not specifically noted a desire to create visual equivalents of female experience. The universalizing rhetoric of modernism precluded such content, and to pursue such a focus would have returned them to the marked identity of a "woman artist," from the privileged identity of simply "artist." However, the universalism of pure abstraction turned out to be a myth that was exposed once theory began to critique the assumptions underlying modernism's notion of universality as put forth by Western white men.

At the same time, the postwar discourse of painting in America associated with the New York School was particularly aggressive in the masculinity of its rhetoric. This gendered aesthetic warfare even today continues to constitute a large part

of the mythos about the postwar era and is part of common rhetoric: when the usually highly articulate art historian and Museum of Modern Art curator Kirk Varnedoe was interviewed on the occasion of the Museum of Modern Art's 1999 Jackson Pollock retrospective, he invoked the words 'macho' and 'masculine' over and over again to describe Pollock's work.¹

Greenbergian formalism had emptied out the field of the rectangular canvas (and the theoretical ground on which it rested) of narrative, personal or literary content and pushed women artists to the theoretical and critical margins. When women artists then began to imagine visual embodiments of female experience, media other than painting proved more hospitable to their desire for formal experimentation in the exploration of previously repressed content. They found in sculpture and new media, including performance art and video, the spaces that could accommodate both the real and metaphoric abstraction referential to the body.

During the same time period, in consciousness-raising sessions women talked frankly about aspects of their experiences that had not been thought fit for high art, although, in fact, the main topics of discussion—money, sex, family, and power—are the basic subjects of so much art by men as well as by women. It made sense to articulate these subjects within figuration and representation.

My experience as a participant in the early feminist art project *Womanhouse*, in Los Angeles in 1972, was instructive: out of twenty three artists, mostly students at CalArts led by the artists and teachers Judy Chicago (b. 1939) and Miriam Schapiro (b. 1923), only three did paintings. Of these three, only Robin Mitchell's *Painted Room* was abstract, a walk-in abstract expressionist painting. But even the representational or figurative paintings, including my own self-portrait, *Red Moon Room*, were the subject of incomprehension by the viewing public, because they did not meet their expectation for illustration of the ideas of Women's Lib as successfully as installations that included specific reference or incorporation of the real (shoes, wedding dresses, and so on) or as the agit-prop performances that hammered the feminist message across as effectively as a Punch and Judy show. It seemed that within a political project, abstraction was less instrumental than representation, and that painting in itself had a degree of inherent abstraction that made it less useful than the real to the elaboration of a political thematic.

Thus, although some of the formal elements developing during the seventies in art, and the feminist theorization of what a female aesthetic based on female sexuality would look like—layering, multiplicity, repetition—seemed congruent with abstraction and, for a moment at least, abstract art seemed like a privileged locus for feminist art, the early feminist art movement, in art practice, art history, and theory, tended to orient itself around representation. Feminist art historians were interested in women who developed a female gaze, a female construction of the body and subject. In the 1980s the most successful women artists were photo-based artists working with codes of representation of femininity such as Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman. To this day, the question of whether the artist of contemporary life can be an abstract artist remains in play. Can contemporary life endure the metaphoric realm of abstraction, or is it literalist, or information-, image- and representation-based?

Given the continuing fraught complexities of these issues, I have begun speaking and writing about my long held belief that Alice Neel is a great abstract painter!

Alice Neel began painting in the 1920s, in a realist style influenced at times by expressionism and Surrealism. Her reputation and career grew alongside the development of the feminist art movement, when young women artists and critics became aware of her work, and when interest in representation fueled by its ability to illustrate the political message of Women's Lib overcame the marginalization of realist painting that had plagued realist painters during the Abstract Expressionist period. In choosing to remain committed to figuration during the 1950s, Neel overtly disobeyed the dominant legislation of high modernism, although she said that she didn't mind the Abstract Expressionists: "I'm not against abstraction. [...] What I can't stand is that the abstractionists pushed all the other pushcarts off the street."² She elaborated,

All my favorite painters are abstractionists: Morris Louis and Clyfford Still. I don't do realism. I do a combination of realism and expressionism. It's never just realism. I hate the New Realism. I hate equating a person and a room and a chair. Compositionally, a room, a chair, a table, and a person are all the same for me, but a person is human and psychological.³

Avoiding clichés of standard prettiness or beauty, Neel is a keen psychological detective, and a brilliant, even sometimes a cruel, caricaturist. She brings these qualities to her representations of men, and she is one of the few white artists in the history of Western art who has painted with equal sympathy and acuity men, women, and children of color. Neel committed herself to human subjects who often, especially early on, lived at the margins of established social hierarchies, to images of people as they had rarely been seen in high art—hugely pregnant naked young women, sophisticated middle aged New York art world figures, black and Puerto Rican children from the barrio, naked male intellectuals, old women.

However Neel's psychological insights are interesting as art works because she draws incredibly well, and uses paint in an



Fig. 1. Alice Neel, *Two Girls, Spanish Harlem* (details) (1959), oil on canvas, 30" x 25". ©Estate of Alice Neel. Private Collection.

informed and skilled manner—a muscular manner, I might even say, using the kind of gender-coded word usually reserved as praise for male artists. There is inventiveness, a sense of conscious commitment in each paint stroke, and an ability to use any type of mark necessary for each individual work.

Neel is as great a painter of abstract expressionist marks as Willem de Kooning or Chaim Soutine,⁴ and I tend to look for those marks in her work, as much as I may read the expression and character of the subject. When viewing the paintings in person, I look at painterly details, the importance of what is painted, what is impasto, what is sketched, what is left out. My attention is not so much formalist as it is cathected to Neel's expressive deployment of painting marks and signs, inserted not only as structuring agents of representation but also as references to the history of painting's indexical vocabulary. Thus, when looking at a painting like *The Spanish Family* (1943), a portrait of a young Puerto Rican mother and her three small children sitting in front of a wrought-iron fence, I am drawn to the individual brushstrokes that make up part of the baby's diaper, at the top giving a sense of the volume of material of the cloth diaper but giving way to drawing of labial folds, and to the way in which the baby's hands are quickly sketched rather than rendered, creating a sense of the infant in motion, right at the center of the painting. In *Two Girls, Spanish Harlem*, (earlier title, *Two Black Girls*) (1959; Pl. 4), the expression on the girls' faces, one of shyness and curiosity about this white lady who is painting them, is certainly the principal subject matter of the work as a representational painting. But what makes it interesting as a painting is what is in surplus to that representational content: the completely abstract painterly



Fig. 2. Alice Neel, *Ethel Ashton* (details) (1930), oil on canvas, 24" x 22". ©Estate of Alice Neel. Tate Gallery, London.

strokes of pink and gray that swirl around the girls, containing them within the rectangle and also separating them from each other, and the separate paintings within the painting of their skirts (Fig. 1). These painterly events are in no way in the service of any representational program; they are there for the conversation with painting only.

Neel was noted for her informative and highly entertaining commentaries on the people who posed for her. Many of these narratives, first collected in print in Patricia Hills's 1983 book *Alice Neel*, were important ways of talking about art works at a time when a formal, non-narrative approach was privileged. Filled with astute psychological observations and personal revelations, they constituted a feminist act in the face of the repression of the personal by much art criticism and art history in the modernist era. The fact that such an anecdotal approach might make an artist seem less significant needs to be critiqued, and, indeed, some feminist criticism has pointed to the discriminatory nature of the opprobrium about a gossipy biographical narrative, unless of course it is gossip about de Kooning, at which point it becomes myth. There are two types of myth in art: the wild man's stories, which co-exist with and enhance his myth as a great artist; and the wild woman's stories, likely to create a lot of appeal but without necessarily enhancing the perceived aesthetic value of her work. If lurid biographical details are belabored in the many studies of artists such as Pollock or de Kooning, the personal is always balanced by more formalist analysis and more aggressive art historical contextualization of the artist.

In what might have been a deliberate effort to confront this double standard head-on, Neel was a primary source of the biographical and anecdotal approach to her work, which continues to dominate its critical and historical perception. It is a familiar mechanism for an artist working from a marginal position to collapse into biography and the personal in an effort to engage the sympathy of the viewer or the reader. Certainly, this approach is a function of Neel's way of seeing the world, with sharply observant understanding of the foibles and failings of the human beings she encountered. Neel says, speaking of her

1930 portrait of Ethel Ashton (Pl. 5)—in which the model, a fellow painter, is depicted naked, with big belly and drooping breasts, and a small mousy shadowed face looking up abjectly at the viewer—"[D]on't you like her left leg on the right. You see, it's very uncompromising. I can assure you, there was no one in the country doing nudes like this. Also it's great for Women's Lib, because she's almost apologizing for living. And look at all that furniture she has to carry all the time."⁵

Neel did not find it necessary to point out certain formal elements of the painting (Fig. 2)—the way that she replicated the drooping breast shape three times, so that the dark face is only a smaller version of the woman's breasts; how her brushstrokes vary so that the face is sketched in quickly with key black outlines such as the nipple like end of the nose, while the breasts are painted with thicker pigment. These elements add to the pathos, the humor, but also to the abstract plastic qualities of the work. Neel understood her skills as a painter, but she did not think it was necessary to spell them out. They were something she could take for granted in the process of working, and perhaps many viewers, tending to overprivilege subject matter at the expense of form, also take the visual, painterly inventiveness for granted, engaged by the merely literal reading of representational art—where what it is a painting *of* can overwhelm one's ability to see that it is a painting first and foremost.

A conversation I had with Raphael Soyer after a slide lecture that Alice Neel gave in Provincetown, Massachusetts, towards the end of her life was instructive. Neel regaled her audience with many of the stories that appear in Patricia Hills's book. I was thrilled to get to hear her; it was fun to hear her tell the same stories I already knew from the book. Nevertheless her self-presentation made me slightly uneasy. I feared that it encouraged a view of her that was consolidated by her well-received February 21, 1984, appearance on the *Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, as a slightly scandalous but endearing little old lady.

Neel was entitled to have an audience in the palm of her hand, and there was a revolutionary power to the approach that she brought to her presentation of self. Thus my concern is not to eliminate one kind of self-presentation of the woman

artist—the biographical, the anecdotal, the humorous, naughty, or outrageous. But what might it have meant for how women artists might be perceived, or how young women artists might imagine themselves, if Neel had also revealed a bit of her more serious aesthetic views, if not on the *Tonight Show*, then in her slide lecture? If the intellectual and the aesthetic were allowed in along with the personal, it would build another idea of what a woman artist could be. This would particularly serve young artists at a time when celebrity and thus biography are paramount. Soyer, who had known and admired Neel for many years, must have experienced the same concern, because he said to me, “You know she is very intelligent, very well read, a real intellectual,” in other words more so than you might think from the lecture. Neel’s reputation is both built upon but perhaps also limited by her own emphasis on her human relationships to her sitters/subjects and the anecdotal approach she brought to the construction of her public identity as an artist. So in some way I wish to rescue her from her own self-presentation, even though I love the stories and believe they emerge from the importance, perhaps the primacy to her, of her engagement with her sitters as a social contract, an intersubjectivity.

Another experience that makes me interested in drawing attention to the zones of abstraction in Neel’s painting goes back to the theory of the “weak fourth quarter,” referred to by Miriam Schapiro in a lecture in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the early 1970s. I’m not sure if this was her own theory; it might have been suggested to her by a feminist art historian in those early years of the development of a new field of art history. The theory was that even in excellent works by well-known women artists, one quarter of an otherwise successfully structured composition would inevitably lose compositional integrity as an unconscious expression of women artists’ struggle with gendered visual languages and their unequal access to social agency.

Needless to say this theory was easily disproved, in both directions of the argument: many male artists’ paintings are troubled by inert fourth quarters, and many women artists, from all time periods, have painted fully animated compositions. What interested me at that time was that this obviously flawed theory nevertheless represented an effort to find a metaphor for the obstacles to full subjectivity experienced by women within the formal visual language of artworks by women.

Now, I am interested in how Neel was able to mobilize the “fourth quarter” where earlier women artists’ confidence on the field of painting *may* have faltered. In the case of a portrait, this is often the background. Neel’s treatment of the background goes through a number of phases that trace the movement from realism towards abstraction.

In her paintings from the 1920s and 1930s Neel generally engages in an imaginative use of peripheral space for additional psychological emphasis and for informative narrative. Thus, in a work such as the portrait of the American poet, *Kenneth Fearing* (1935), the background includes a kind of alternate, symbolically biographical representation of the subject, situated in the urban setting of his poetry, with various references to his work and his personal life surrounding him like a Lilliputian supporting cast. Neel benefited from the permission created by Surrealism and

the kind of multiple spaces that Surrealism adapted from Early Italian Renaissance and Flemish painting to suggest more than one narrative space, to suggest internal spaces, and in general propose more than one reality on one canvas.

In a second phase, in the 1940s and 1950s, she reached into the vocabulary of Abstract Expressionism, placing thick, violently embodied strokes of paint to the side of and to some extent independent of the figure and the conventions of portrait painting. If the style and quality of these marks is similar to marks by expressionist artists such as de Kooning or Soutine, Neel activates the relationship between figure and ground in a manner consistent with the goals of artists such as Barnett Newman and critics such as Clement Greenberg, who emphasized the essential flatness of panel painting. Neel, however, does so within a representational frame that includes the rendering or referencing of three-dimensional space.⁶

The background in Neel’s 1952 portrait of Dore Ashton combines both these trends in an almost didactic manner. Bold, intensely brushed areas of orange, red, and purple crowd the uncharacteristically flatly rendered portrait, so that the figure has the sculptural boldness of a Picasso from the same period. But these abstract areas of color may be exactly as narrative and literal as the background images in the *Kenneth Fearing* portrait, identifying Ashton as one of the foremost critics of the Abstract Expressionist period. It would seem likely that the orange and red marks are representations of a specific painting in back of the figure, or a remembered image of such a painting. Certainly this is one work where Neel can overtly, even self-consciously, play with something that is in fact active in all her paintings.

In her later years her use of the background space of the portrait as filled with pure painting marks shifts to her confidence with emptiness and telegraphed indications of a site for the figure, with just enough thin color where, in earlier work, she might have had symbolic narrative or expressive strokes. Often the ground is white, simply primed canvas, and the barely rendered figure is situated through economically deployed areas of color surrounding it at key points. In a portrait of the museum curator Tom Freudenheim, only the face is at all rendered, the ground is white, with patches of ochre and blue directly behind the upper torso of the figure. As in *Dore Ashton*, the background may be an abstract painting on the wall—but in this case not an intensely painterly one, but, rather, a contemporaneous example of flat, post painterly abstraction.

Of the paintings from this period, one of the most extraordinary is her 1980 *Self-Portrait* (Pl. 3). My memory of Neel’s appearance on the *Tonight Show* includes her gleefully showing a picture of this painting and saying something like “and look at those legs, don’t they just look like pieces of furniture,” eerily reprising her comments on her portrait of Ethel Ashton. Neel used humor to engage the audience in a painting that achieves something really significant in the history of representation by foregrounding the body of the woman artist in a stage of life that normally would not be figured because it is beyond its use value to a homosocially structured economy.

While this self-portrait remains a relatively conventional representational portrait—the painter depicted painting, the subject sitting on a chair in a room, in a legible space—her subject

is revolutionary: the old woman's body is represented without a trace of abjectness and her indication of three-dimensional space is radically spare. She sits in the blue striped chair that figured in many of her paintings, against dynamically oriented indications of blue, ochre, and green ground, on otherwise white primed canvas. In her left hand she holds a white paint rag that hovers at the edge of the meeting between a few strokes of blue and the white upper right of the canvas, as if she has wiped away the background. The diagonal line created by the meeting of an area of ochre (floor) and an area of green (rug) can be traced directly back to her crotch, suggesting through its formal energy the reserve of sexual potency of this grandmother.

Such spatial emptiness is a defining characteristic of the phenomenon of "old age style," as is evident in the late works by Cézanne for example—looser, quicker, "unfinished" insofar as areas of blank, primed canvas show through. These minimal indications of painterly space are the most mature embodiment of Neel's strengths as a purely plastic abstract painter. The painting is important in terms of what she is depicting, the older woman's naked body as the subject of the female artist's gaze. But it is also the culmination of the development of the painterly and formal in her work.

The goal of the early feminist art and art history movement particularly in its American version was to recover, create, and support great women artists. The subject matter of great art throughout history is form and materiality, just as much as it is what Meyer Schapiro called the "object matter," that is to say, that which is represented.⁷ Thus, to say that Alice Neel was a great abstract painter is to say that she was a great painter. Her painterly intelligence animates her portraits just as much as her skills as a "collector of souls"⁸ This is of particular interest at a time when many figurative painters pursue simulacral "painterliness," without the expressive inflection, variety, or material substance that emerge from the intersubjectivity, with her subjects and the subject of painting, of Neel's painterly practice. In the context of women and abstraction, a study of the background in Alice Neel's paintings suggests the continued importance of intrinsically abstract "surplus" painterly information to the aesthetic as well as the expressive content of representational painting. •

Mira Schor, a painter and writer, teaches at the Parsons The New School for Design and in the School of Visual Arts MFA in Art Criticism and Writing Program. She is the author of *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture* (1997) and co-editor of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism* (2000).

NOTES

This article is based on my presentation at the Alice Neel Symposium at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., on November 19, 2005. A longer version of this essay appears in *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 17: 2 (2006).

1. In the report titled "Jack the Dripper," broadcast on *The Newshour with Jim Lehrer*, January 11, 1999.
2. Alice Neel, quoted in Patricia Hills, *Alice Neel* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1983), 80.

3. Neel, quoted in Hills. In speaking of "New Realism," Neel may be alluding to the objective approach espoused by the work of Philip Pearlstein.
4. Neel's painting of a turkey in the sink, *Thanksgiving* (1965), although not even one of her most expressionistically painted works, was included in "The New Landscape/The New Still Life: Soutine and Modern Art," at Cheim & Read Gallery, New York City, June 22 - September 9, 2006. The painting was placed between two significant still life paintings by Soutine, representing, respectively, two dead game birds, and a dead hare. The importance of Soutine's work to artists such as Willem de Kooning is discussed in Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *de Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 312-13. Cf. "The Wandering Soutine," "Published Writings 1948-1967," *The Extreme of the Middle: The Writings of Jack Tworok*, Mira Schor, ed., unpublished manuscript.
5. Neel, quoted in Hills, *Alice Neel*, 30.
6. See Jeremy Lewison, "Alice Neel: A Chronicler of Her Times," in *Alice Neel: A Chronicle of New York 1950-1976*. Exh. cat. (New York: Victoria Miro Gallery, 2004), n.p. Lewison makes the connection to Newman in his description of another Neel portrait from this period, *Black Spanish Family* from 1950, where the background is a richly painted Indian Red: "Behind them the red wall, an interesting echo of Barnett Newman's *Onement I* (1948) and *Onement III* (1949), creates a somber if not mournful backdrop to life in Spanish Harlem."
7. Here I am quoting from Barnett Newman's description of Schapiro's views, in the film documentary on the New York School by Emile de Antonio, director and producer, *Painters Painting*, Turin Film Corp., 1972.
8. Neel, quoted in Carolyn Kinder Carr, *Alice Neel: Women* (New York: Rizzoli, 2002), 4.

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

Please Send Books for Review and Editorial Correspondence to:

Woman's Art Journal
Rutgers University
Dept. of Art History, Voorhees Hall
71 Hamilton Street
New Brunswick, NJ 08901, USA

womansartjournal@womansartjournal.org

REVISITING *WOMANHOUSE*

Welcome to the (Deconstructed) *Dollhouse*

By Temma Balducci

Womanhouse, an installation/performance piece produced by Miriam Schapiro (b. 1923), Judy Chicago (b. 1939), and young artists in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts, was opened to viewers at 533 Mariposa Street in Hollywood, California, from January 30 to February 28, 1972.¹ The work attracted thousands of visitors and was the first feminist work to receive national attention when it was reviewed in *Time* magazine.² Within the history of feminist art, however, *Womanhouse* has generated scant scholarly notice. Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979) has instead become the exemplar of 1970s feminist art, often being reproduced in introductory survey texts as the sole illustration of feminist art. Undoubtedly, this lack of interest in *Womanhouse* and other early feminist works stems in part from continued assumptions about 1970s feminist art as essentializing—a stereotype reinforced by the excessive focus on *The Dinner Party*.³ Despite scattered calls from feminist scholars over the past decade to move beyond the notion of generational conflicts—the (mistaken) idea that this art can be neatly divided into the essentialist 1970s and the constructivist 1980s—there has been remarkably little attention devoted to rethinking the 1970s within the broader history of feminist art.⁴ Assumptions about *The Dinner Party* as the major feminist production of the 1970s has only served to foreground essentialism and minimize other, often more complex, works of the decade. Perhaps revisiting the significance of *Womanhouse* within the history of feminist art by examining some of its rooms and performances, and particularly *The Dollhouse* (Pl. 6), will provide ways of considering that history in a more cohesive, less divisive manner.

Few would argue that one of the most consistently and hotly debated issues for feminist art—determining how scholars think of its development and history—is how various works have addressed the relationship between essential and constructed identity.⁵ This supposed binary has all but defined the historiography of feminist art, and it is precisely this misreading that makes *Womanhouse* a propitious place to begin imagining a broader history of feminist art. *Womanhouse* deftly draws attention to the relationship between essential and constructed identities in such a way that it complicates this false binary, and, in doing so, provides a foundation of sorts for feminist art in its early acknowledgment of themes that continue to be relevant today.

Why has such an early, complex, and initially well-publicized work as *Womanhouse* generated so little scholarly

interest? Putting aside any prejudice toward the presumed essentialism of the 1970s, there is the fact of its ephemeral nature. Because most of the work for the project was destroyed shortly after the exhibition closed, scholars today are unable to visit the site, walk through and examine its rooms, or experience the various performances that took place there. It is thus difficult to imagine its impact on the artists as well as the visitors/viewers, many of whom, according to some accounts, were moved to tears. The surviving remnants—a 1974 film, photographs, *The Dollhouse* and other artifacts, and the occasional revived performances—evoke increasingly remote memories of the original. The work is also likely to be easily overlooked because there is no single artist's name attached to it. While *Womanhouse* was not the only collaborative work from the period, it is notable that such works have rarely found their way into mainstream art history texts. Indeed, *The Dinner Party* is probably the best-known collaborative piece from the period, yet it is typically attributed solely to Chicago while her scores of volunteers remain nameless.⁶ At a more visceral level, *Womanhouse* simply proved less controversial, attention grabbing, and divisive than *The Dinner Party*. Finally, because *Womanhouse* was produced so early, the critical language and understanding were not yet in place to deal with the complicated issues broached in the piece.

The roughly ten thousand people who entered the seventeen-room space were confronted with a deconstruction of the myth of the white, middle-class housewife as a satisfied, fulfilled, domestic goddess.⁷ A widespread reaction against that role had taken root in the United States as early as 1963, with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a book that was influential in the making of *Womanhouse*.⁸ The artists who produced *Womanhouse* used parody and exaggeration as tools to undermine essentialist stereotypes about women that limited them to domestic roles, making it one of the earliest feminist artworks to question the boundaries between essential and constructed meaning.

If, according to Judith Butler, acts of reiteration and parody reveal the constructed nature of social roles, then *Womanhouse* can be examined for its disruption of gender expectations for the white, middle-class (presumably heterosexual) housewife in the late sixties and early seventies.⁹ Butler specifically discusses the repetition of heterosexual constructs as a possible site for the denaturalization of gender categories.¹⁰ She refers



Fig. 1 Faith Wilding and Janice Lester, *Cock and Cunt* (1972). Through the Flower archive.

primarily to the subversion of heterosexuality through gay and lesbian parody, especially in drag, but her point is relevant here as well. In *Womanhouse*, the parodic repetition of expectations for these white, middle-class housewives in the 1960s and 1970s underscores the performative nature of their assigned roles, and thus reveals the requisite performance needed to sustain these roles. This exploration of gender roles in a project labeled “woman-house” serves to confound notions of a rigid essential vs. constructed binary. On the one hand, the very concept of a “woman-house” is essentialist, as it

suggests a space reserved for women—women defined in terms of their difference from men. Further, there is the underlying assumption that the issues addressed in such a “woman-house” would be relevant to all women, regardless of race, ethnic identity, age, class, or sexual orientation.

On the other hand, the circumscribed definition of “woman” the artists adopted can be seen as an example of what Diana Fuss has defined as the strategic use of essentialism.¹¹ As I will argue, *Womanhouse* was an attempt to rally against those essentialisms that had been used to categorize women in both the domestic and the artistic realms. William Wilson’s 1972 review in the *Los Angeles Times* is indicative of the stereotypes against which the artists were working. Wilson describes *Womanhouse* as a “lair of female creativity” that “reminds us that the female is our only direct link with the forces of nature and that man’s greatest creative acts may be but envious shadowings of her fecundity.”¹² His review exemplifies the patriarchal attitudes about women’s connection to the body, nature, and the domestic, the very issues being interrogated by the artists working on *Womanhouse*. Thus, while the artists’ definition of “woman” was limited, with few exceptions, by their own biases and experiences as white, middle-class heterosexuals, they were, simultaneously, critiquing societal expectations about such women.¹³

The inspiration for *Womanhouse* has been attributed to Paula Harper, an art historian working with the Feminist Art Program.¹⁴ After giving her idea an enthusiastic reception, students in the program formed small groups to search for an appropriate setting for the proposed work. Rather quickly, one group found an abandoned seventy-five-year-old house that seemed suitable for the project. They located the owner, Amanda Psalter, and negotiated an agreement in which she would donate the house to the program for three months. The twenty-one students, along with Schapiro and Chicago, arrived at the house on November 8, 1971,

to begin their work. Having been vandalized numerous times and already slated for demolition, the structure was in an advanced state of disrepair, with the stair rail missing, toilets clogged with detritus, windows broken out, and countless other problems. The artists had to deal with basic maintenance issues such as installing lights and repairing windows in addition to undertaking the job of transforming the house into a proper work environment and exhibition space. They built walls and partitions, painted and wallpapered, and refinished floors. The renovation effort entailed a steep learning curve for the participating artists, as most, if not all, of the skills needed to complete these tasks were generally associated with men. Few of the women had ever worked with power tools or had everyday dealings with hardware store personnel. The working conditions were far from ideal: the house was a long commuting distance from the school and lacked heat, plumbing, and hot water, among other things.

As changes were taking place to the structure, they were also taking place within the students themselves. Along with the difficult job of restoring the house to an acceptable condition, the women held consciousness-raising sessions in which they discussed and brainstormed about how to approach individual rooms and projects, using their own experiences of home and femininity as subject matter at a time when content-based art in America was anathema. Individual students tackled some rooms while others were collaborative projects among several participants. After eleven weeks of intensive work, *Womanhouse* opened to the public.

As visitors made their way through the house, viewing the individual rooms and watching performances, gendered expectations of domestic life were undermined at every turn.¹⁵ The performance piece *Cock and Cunt* (Fig. 1), written by Chicago and performed by Faith Wilding and Janice Lester, tackled the construction of gender roles based on biological difference. As indicated by the title, the two characters are identified by comically outsized genitalia. The short, telling dialogue between them ran in part as follows:

SHE (doing the dishes) Will you help me do the dishes?

HE (shocked) Help you do the dishes?

SHE Well they’re your dishes as much as mine!

HE But you don’t have a cock! (grasps cock and begins stroking it proudly)

SHE What’s that got to do with?

HE A cock means you don’t wash dishes. You have a cunt. A cunt means you wash dishes.

SHE (looking at cunt) I don’t see where it says that on my cunt.

HE (pointing at her cunt) Stu-upid, your cunt/pussy/gash/hole or whatever it is, is round like a dish. Therefore it’s only right for you to wash dishes. My cock is long and hard and straight and is meant to shoot like guns or missiles. Anyone can see that (strokes cock on each emphasis).¹⁶

This parody of traditional roles pointedly addresses these functions as social constructions based on the body. When “He” uses the woman’s lack of a penis as a justification for her having to wash the dishes, “She” points out that this requirement is not specifically written on her body. “He” then concocts pseudo-scientific reasoning to support his claim, thus attempting to naturalize it: “round = dish,” “long = missile.”¹⁷ The pointed questioning of the relationship between women and dishes provides a striking contrast to *The Dinner Party*, where dishes are directly associated with female genitalia. Rather than being used as a site for celebratory, essentialist readings, the female body is expressly invoked as a site that allows for the oppressive positioning of women as domestic workers. If, as Judith Butler argues, conditions of power must be reiterated in order to persist, this work foregrounds the necessity of that reiteration and radically disrupts it.¹⁸ This piece in particular suggests that many of the artists involved in *Womanhouse* were more interested in revealing the consequences of stereotyping than in positing essentialist notions about the female body.

The female performance of beauty for the benefit of men was parodied in several rooms in *Womanhouse*. The longing to look beautiful and the concomitant fear of aging associated with the white, middle-class housewife was movingly addressed in *Leah’s Room* (Fig. 2), created by Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman. The space was a watermelon-pink bedroom inhabited by Léa, a character from Colette’s novel, *Chéri* (1920), about an aging courtesan.¹⁹ Though stunning in her youth, as Léa ages, her young lover, Chéri, loses interest. In the continuous daily performances, visitors encountered Léa sitting at a dressing table meticulously applying makeup, then removing it in dissatisfaction, only to begin again in her futile effort to remain youthful looking. According to Butler, subject formation takes place specifically as the “incorporation of norms,”²⁰ and it is precisely this internalization of expectations that is being explored in this piece. The repetitive nature of the performance in *Leah’s Room* reveals the application of makeup by white, middle-class housewives as a performance done for men as well as for their own internalized narratives about what constitutes the feminine and the beautiful. The underlying suggestion, that the housewife is to be constantly sexually available, is made overt here by the fact that Léa is a high-priced courtesan. The housewife, not encouraged to pursue her own goals, must instead exchange sexual favors for economic protection and hope that she can disguise the effects of aging in order to maintain her security.

Lipstick Bathroom by Camille Grey, and *Shoe Closet* (Fig. 3) by Beth Bachenheimer reinforced the association of the female with makeup, beauty, and self-display for the pleasure of a male partner. The extravagant number of shoes in the closet (excessive in an early-1970s, pre-Carrie Bradshaw context), like the fiery lipstick-red bathroom, underscored women’s sometimes-frantic attempts to meet societal expectations to be beautiful and fashionable. The parodic exaggeration in the two rooms exposed the construction of the housewife as an object of display who must continually change her costume and mask for her husband’s pleasure. Rather than a tool for empowerment, performance is shown here to be an act of desperation that allows women to remain sexually attractive to men to retain their economic stability.



Fig. 2 Karen LeCoq and Nancy Youdelman, *Leah’s Room* (1972), mixed media site installation. *Through the Flower* archive.

Other pieces in *Womanhouse* parodied the construction of the white, middle-class, housewife as happily devoted to serving the needs of others, most evident in *Nurturant Kitchen* (Fig. 4) by Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts, and Robin Weltsch. Applied egg forms on the ceiling gradually become breasts moving down the wall, eventually surrounding the other sources of nutrition found on the shelves of food and in the refrigerator. These items underscore the traditional role of the female as nurturer as do the increasingly sagging breasts that reference the physiological changes attendant upon breastfeeding. The parody of the kitchen, however, reveals these expectations to be monotonous and burdensome. This was shown not only by the elision of difference between the housewife and the room itself—both have breasts—but was also reinforced in the adjoining pantry. Here the viewer saw a repetitive assembly line of dishes prepared for the seemingly endless rounds of breakfast, lunch, and dinner that the housewife was expected to prepare throughout her lifetime. Plates of food placed under a row of bald light bulbs highlighted the factory-like, dehumanizing aspect of this chore. Rather than showing a reclamation or celebration of the association between the female body and nurturing, food preparation was revealed as tedious labor. Significantly, *Aprons in Kitchen* by Susan Frazier, one of the displays in the *Nurturant Kitchen*, provided a solution for the housewife. Because the aprons were fashioned with breasts and other body parts, the implication was that when the housewife removed her apron she had not only completed her household duties, but had also shed the distinctive bodily characteristics



Fig. 3 Beth Bachenheimer, *Shoe Closet* (1972), mixed media site installation. *Through the Flower* archive.



Fig. 4 Susan Frazier, Vicki Hodgetts, Robin Weltsch, *Nurturant Kitchen* (1972), mixed media site installation.

that have historically made her servile, again underlining gender as a construct based on the body.

The myth that women find enjoyment and fulfillment through housework was also the subject of two “maintenance” pieces: *Scrubbing*, performed by Chris Rush, and *Ironing* (Fig. 5), performed by Sandra Orgel.²¹ The stage directions were as follows: “A woman is scrubbing the floor on her hands and knees. All fours. Back and forth, over and over, her arms circle and circle the floor in continuous motion scrubbing with a brush and plenty of elbow grease. Later another woman irons a sheet, then another. Or is it the same sheet? Then another.”²² Breaking down, isolating, and performing such monotonous, banal (and dehumanizing) chores for an audience served to foreground the performative nature of the tasks and their role in the construction of gender, radically undercutting their ideological power. In the process of questioning the domestic arena, the artists involved in *Womanhouse* revealed the underlying patriarchal expectations that governed the domestic sphere during this period as a first step to reclaiming the space on their own terms, or even abandoning it altogether as a patriarchal fiction that had been outgrown—much like a dollhouse.

The centerpiece of *The Dollhouse Room*, and one of the key elements of *Womanhouse*, was Sherry Brody and Miriam Schapiro’s *The Dollhouse*. (This surviving piece of the project now resides in the Smithsonian Institution.) The work subverts the traditional gender expectations perpetuated through a seemingly innocuous children’s plaything. As a house in miniature that was located within the larger house, *The*

Dollhouse can be seen as symbolic of the whole, alluding to the use of play found throughout the project—the dressing up and role-playing that are at the core of the parody and exaggeration in *Womanhouse*. Its title, *The Dollhouse* also suggests a possible source for the name *Womanhouse*.

The Dollhouse, like *Womanhouse*, addresses the construction of gender. Beginning in the seventeenth century, when modern gender roles first began to take shape in Europe, the private and public spheres were discursively assigned to women and men, respectively.²³ Around the same time, in Germany and the Netherlands, elaborate miniature houses first came into use as conversation pieces for upper-class women.²⁴ While providing the women with a creative outlet, the miniature houses also reinforced gender roles, becoming an outward manifestation of increasingly internalized norms. Even in the dollhouses belonging to women with no children, the largest rooms were often the lying-in room and nursery, thus reflecting the pervasiveness of feminine ideals that placed women in domestic and, more specifically, maternal roles.²⁵ In the late-nineteenth century, miniature houses were being mass-manufactured and became associated with children’s play, where they have continued to serve in the normalization of gender roles.

Through parody and exaggeration, the six rooms in *The Dollhouse* critique the roles that white, middle-class women in mid-twentieth-century America were expected to perform and can be seen as a model for reading the entire *Womanhouse* project. In the upper right of this miniature house is the artist’s studio. There, on a pedestal, stands a nude, tumescent man with a tray of bananas at his feet. His importance is difficult to overestimate, as the only other human figure inside *The Dollhouse* is a diminutive woman at her dressing table on the floor below. According to the catalogue, the artists who made the figure were influenced by Linda Nochlin’s photograph of a nude man holding a tray of bananas with which she parodied paintings and photographs from the nineteenth century that associated women’s breasts with apples.²⁶ His presence in the studio thus likens him to the many portrayals of nude women in Western visual culture not only in the nineteenth century, but also since the Renaissance.²⁷ The references to past art, along with his position on a pedestal, suggest that the figure is meant to be read as a model and he is referred to as such in the catalogue.

The figure’s erect penis hints at a humorous reversal of the notion that linked artistic creativity with male sexual potency. The idea that male sexuality is the wellspring of creativity was a stock assumption in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It surfaces repeatedly in statements made by male artists of the period about their own creative processes. For example, Wassily Kandinsky compared the blank canvas to a pure virgin that he had to bend to his will and conquer; Pierre-Auguste Renoir, suffering from arthritis late in life, claimed that he managed by painting with his prick. Artists were not the only ones to make such remarks. Sigmund Freud argued that in order to make full use of his libido for cultural aims a man must forgo his sexual urges, implying that creativity and libido are necessarily coupled.²⁸ *Womanhouse*, of course, was neither the first nor the only artwork to parody this notion. Artists as diverse as Andy Warhol, Louise Bourgeois (b. 1911), and Lynda Benglis

(b. 1941) have made pointed and mocking references to the assumed connections between the penis and creativity.

There is, however, another potential reading for the artist's studio that is tied more specifically to the issues of gender construction addressed elsewhere in *Womanhouse*. Considering the absence of an artist in the studio (male or female), the nude figure cannot be read simply as a model. Though the man is nude and tumescent, he is not otherwise sexualized or vulnerable. He is not, for example, lying down or posed in a sexually suggestive manner. With his upright stance and presence on the top floor, he dominates not only the artist's studio but also the entire *Dollhouse*. His solitary presence in the studio can also be read as an exaggerated stereotype of the potent artist whose creativity derives from his male sexuality. This reading is underscored by the easel to his right, on which is displayed a miniature version of Schapiro's *Sixteen Windows* (1965). This minimalist, grid-like work of art references the then-predominant artistic style in the male-controlled art world.²⁹ Had the studio been intended as a female space, Schapiro more likely would have either displayed one of her "femmagies," with which she was already experimenting, or represented the male figure/model on the canvas.³⁰ By satirizing the exalted status of the male artist through exaggeration and parody, the artist's studio is a reminder to the viewer about the place of women in both the artistic and domestic realms—all but absent in one and diminished in the other.

Occupying the uppermost floor of *The Dollhouse*, the artist's studio and, to its left, the nursery point to the housewife's constricted place in the supposedly female sphere of the home.³¹ Dominating these rooms are the man (creative, ready for sex) and a crib in which the baby has been replaced by a monster (suggesting an overly demanding child?), thus underlining the hierarchy in the patriarchal structure these artists were interrogating. The housewife has no place in which to fully and freely pursue her own interests, and all the remaining rooms—dressing room, bedroom, parlor, and kitchen—are devoted to caring for and/or pleasing her husband and child. The lack of furniture in the parlor suggests that it serves primarily as a showplace, and, ominously, there are men on the ground floor looking in through the kitchen window, implying the constant surveillance of domestic activity.

The idiom "a woman's place is in the home," is most obviously addressed in the two rooms on the middle floor, the dressing room and the bedroom, both of which contain beds. In a subversive remaking of these spaces, Brody and Schapiro expose the role of the housewife as a sex object during a period when such women were expected to have few interests outside the domestic arena. Nominally a woman's private space, the dressing room is devoted to the wife's ongoing concern with beauty and the effects of aging in order to satisfy her husband in the adjacent bedroom. Moreover, a framed photograph of a movie star represents the impossible beauty ideals toward which women strived. The woman's diminutive size and her position at the dressing table indicate her status in the home, especially in contrast to the much larger, upright male figure above. The bedroom, significantly named "The Seraglio," suggests an exotic setting where harems were kept, complete with carpeted walls, brightly patterned bed coverings, pillows



Fig. 5 Sandra Orgel, *Ironing* (1972). Through the Flower archive.

on the floor, and rare birds.³² This association of the housewife with the imprisoned inhabitants of a harem (or with the courtesan Léa), whose sole purpose was to be always sexually available, suggests the exchange of sexual favors in return for economic security that middle-class marriage offered. Again, the dressing room and "The Seraglio" remind viewers that these supposedly private spheres of women are permeated by the assumptions and expectations of patriarchal society.

The Dollhouse is thus a subversion of the "toy" dollhouse as a place for the normalization of gender roles. As such it provides a key to reading the entire *Womanhouse* project, which itself interrogated gender roles. *Womanhouse* exposed and rejected the idea of the housewife as a beautiful doll expected to perform without complaining, to be pliable and nonresistant, and to have no demands or needs of her own but to exist as a male construction, created to fulfill his needs. It is in this way that *The Dollhouse* reveals the source of the project title. Attempting to undercut the childlike stereotype of the white, middle-class housewife, the artists reconceptualized the doll as a woman with her own valid opinions and desires, thus creating a "womanhouse." This deconstruction of an essentialist category that inadvertently establishes yet another essentializing category reveals the complexities not only of the essential/constructed binary, but also of *Womanhouse* itself as one of the earliest feminist pieces to deal with such issues.

Other projects at the Feminist Art Program at Fresno and at the California Institute of the Arts between 1970 and 1975 were using parody and exaggeration to deconstruct essentialisms and to posit femininity as a social construct. Leading up to *Womanhouse*, the student artists created a number of projects related to exploring the expectations for white, middle-class, heterosexual women. For example, Chicago and her students at Fresno staged a mock beauty pageant; the women dressed as various female stereotypes, such as Whore, Victorian Lady, and Kewpie Doll, and made a photograph themselves, titled *Miss Chicago and the California Girls* (1970).³³ They scoffed at the expectations they had grown up with: to be beautiful, to be concerned with their bodies, and to be on display for the

pleasure of men. As in *Womanhouse*, they turned parody into power—mocking the insidiousness of stereotypes that enable gender expectations. In *Cunt Cheerleaders* (1970), four artists had donned pink and red jerseys with letters that together spelled out “cunt,” making fun of both the exclusive association of women with this body part and the expectation that women put themselves on display to arouse male desire. By forcing such underlying assumptions into the open, the artists made them crudely obvious and thus powerless.

The use of the female body in these and other works has often been misread or dismissed, either as essentializing or as reiterating male paradigms for the representation of women. In “Screening the 1970s,” Griselda Pollock writes: “In the works of Judy Chicago ... the woman’s sexualized body functions as the sign of the reclaiming of women’s essential identity and integrity. Sexuality is understood within this tradition as a quality or attribute, innate, essential and liberating.”³⁴ Pollock conflates Chicago’s work in *Womanhouse* with later productions such as *The Dinner Party*, which, with its celebratory use of central-core imagery, is profoundly essentializing. In pieces such as *Nurturant Kitchen* or *Cock and Cunt*, the female body was used as a parodic disruption of gender expectations rather than for essentializing purposes. Thus, arguably, *Womanhouse* had a more significant impact on later feminist art than has the more controversial and divisive (though iconic) *Dinner Party*. As other scholars have noted, the narrowing of feminist art of that decade to this one work, Judy Chicago, and central-core imagery has only reinforced a false dichotomy within feminist art.³⁵

In their efforts to reassess feminist art of the 1970s, some art historians have focused on the essentializing aspects of works of art that could be read differently. In *The Power of Feminist Art*, for example, editors Norma Broude and Mary Garrard include their 1993 interview with Judy Chicago. In response to their question, “What kind of reception did *Womanhouse* have in Los Angeles?” Chicago replies that she is disturbed that although the ideas behind the radical work done in *Womanhouse* have moved into the mainstream, their sources have been ignored.

Chicago does not elaborate further, and Broude and Garrard do not pursue the topic but instead ask their next question: “Tell us how you developed what has come to be called your central-core imagery?” In moving directly from *Womanhouse* to central-core imagery, the interview, perhaps unintentionally, implies a connection between *Womanhouse* and central-core imagery.

With few exceptions, the artists who produced *Womanhouse* were themselves white, heterosexual, and middle-class, and their work is, necessarily, a product of that positioning. While attempting to speak for “woman,” these artists were voicing the concerns more specifically related to their racial, class, and sexual positioning in the late sixties and early seventies. However, despite these gaps in critical consciousness, which are so blatantly obvious from a twenty-first century perspective, it is more productive to read *Womanhouse* in ways that problematize exclusively essentialist readings. Through the use of parody and exaggeration, the artists who produced this remarkable project were intent on deconstructing oppressive stereotypes that limited the roles of white, middle-class, heterosexual women. A one-dimensional reading of the

work as essentializing does a disservice to its complexities.

Employing postmodern feminist theory to complicate readings of early feminist works of art unsettles the binaries between essential and constructed meanings that have been used to pigeonhole and invalidate these early works. *Womanhouse* helped lay the groundwork for the exploration of gender construction through parody and exaggeration that continues to be important for feminist art. I hope that this essay illuminates the ways in which specific works such as *Womanhouse* can be re-examined within a more comprehensive history of feminist art—one that includes the 1970s as a germinal decade that had a decisive impact on the themes and subjects of later feminist art. •

Temma Balducci is an assistant professor at Arkansas State University. She has published on the album paintings of Mary Ellen Best and is currently involved in a book project on the boulevard paintings of Jean Béraud.

NOTES

1. Judy Chicago, *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975), 103-04. Along with Chicago and Schapiro, 21 students participated in the project: Beth Bachenheimer, Sherry Brody, Susan Frazier, Camille Grey, Vicki Hodgetts, Kathy Huberland, Judy Huddleston, Karen Lecoq, Janice Lester, Paula Longendyke, Ann Mills, Robin Mitchell, Sandy Orgel, Jan Oxenberg, Christine Rush, Robin Schiff, Mira Schor, Robin Weltsch, Faith Wilding, Shawnee Wollenman, and Nancy Youdelman. See Miriam Schapiro, “Recalling *Womanhouse*,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 15:1-2 (Spring/Summer 1987): 30. Wanda Westcott and Carol Edison Mitchell also contributed work; see Arlene Raven, “*Womanhouse*,” in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, eds., *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact*, (New York: Abrams, 1994), 48. The catalogue records 533 Mariposa as the street address, although other sources give 553 Mariposa; see Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, *Womanhouse: Exhibition of the Feminist Art Program* (Valencia: California Institute of the Arts, 1972), n.p. See www.wmm.com for *Womanhouse* (1974), a film record about the project, including of the original rooms and performances.
2. “Bad-Dream House,” *Time* (March 20, 1972): 77.
3. Amelia Jones addresses this misconception and imbalance in “Sexual Politics: Feminist Strategies, Feminist Conflicts, Feminist Histories,” in *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*, Amelia Jones, ed. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1996), 20-38. See also Linda Nochlin, et. al., “Feminism & Art: Nine Views,” *Artforum* 42:2 (October 2003): 141-42. Stereotypes and even discomfort about the 1970s are evident in this recent dialogue about feminist art.
4. See for example, Mira Schor’s contribution to “Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective,” *Art Journal* 58:4 (Winter 1999): 23-25; and Amelia Jones’s observation that it is unproductive to bracket the 1970s as a primitive period of feminist thinking, in Nochlin, et. al., “Feminism & Art: Nine Views,” 143.
5. Linda Nochlin sees this as the fundamental division. See Nochlin, et. al., “Feminism & Art: Nine Views,” 141.
6. See Maureen Mullarkey, “Dishing It Out: Judy Chicago’s *Dinner Party*,” *Commonweal* 108 (April 1981): 210-11, which provides a scathing critique of labor practices used in producing the work. In the original installation at the Brooklyn Museum of Art and elsewhere, the names of participants were listed on a wall display. The piece will be installed again in the Sackler Galleries, but it is not currently on view.
7. Arlene Raven claimed 10,000 visitors in her “*Womanhouse*,” 61. The *Womanhouse* catalogue stated there were 17 rooms, but Schapiro later

- claimed there were 21. See Moira Roth, "Interview with Miriam Schapiro," *The Shrine, The Computer, and The Dollhouse*, (La Jolla: Mandeville Art Gallery, 1975), 14. Rooms and pieces were: *Personal Environment*, *Leaf Room*, *Dollhouse Room*, *Dining Room*, *Nurturant Kitchen* (including *Eggs to Breasts* and *Aprons in Kitchen*), *Bridal Staircase*, *Crocheted Environment*, *Menstruation Bathroom*, *Garden Jungle*, *Nursery*, *Shoe Closet*, *Red Moon Room*, *Painted Room*, *Nightmare Bathroom*, *Linen Closet*, *Personal Space*, *Leah's Room*, *Lipstick Bathroom*, *Necco Wafers*. Performances took place in the living room. Chicago and Schapiro, *Womanhouse*, n.p.
8. Arlene Raven, *Crossing Over: Feminism and Art of Social Concern* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1988), 99. Other influential publications include the English translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1952), Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1968), Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex* (1970), and *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), an anthology edited by Robin Morgan.
 9. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1997). See also Raven, "Womanhouse," 51-60, on social roles.
 10. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 31-4, 124, 137.
 11. See Diane Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989).
 12. William Wilson, "Lair of Female Creativity," *Los Angeles Times* (February 21, 1972), sec. 4: 10. Chicago discusses the obstacles faced by female artists during this period in *Through the Flower*, 27-53.
 13. Some of the participants were married, and Faith Wilding, in a letter to the author, June 23, 2006, indicated that although at least two were out as lesbians at the time, this was not a factor in the conception of the house. Raven, in "Womanhouse," 63, discusses the failure of the work to acknowledge lesbian experience. For an overview of how the movement in its early years often overlooked the experiences of lesbians and women of color, see Amelia Jones, "The 'Sexual Politics' of *The Dinner Party*," 82-118.
 14. The information in this paragraph is found piecemeal in numerous sources. I relied on Miriam Schapiro, "The Education of Women as Artists: Project Womanhouse," *Art Journal* 31:3 (Spring 1972), and "Recalling Womanhouse," 25-30; 247-53; Faith Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women's Artist Movement in Southern California* (Santa Monica: Double X, 1977): 25-29; Raven, "Womanhouse"; Chicago, *Through the Flower*; and Chicago and Schapiro, *Womanhouse*.
 15. Not all rooms and/or performances within *Womanhouse* will be discussed in this essay, even though there are numerous other pieces relevant to the argument presented here including *Bridal Staircase*, *Waiting*, and *Linen Closet*. In fairness, I must also acknowledge that there are works that fit less easily with my reading of the project such as *Birth Trilogy*, *Menstruation Bathroom*, and *Crocheted Environment*.
 16. Quoted in Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 208-12.
 17. Thanks to Maria-Elena Buszek for pointing out the male's need to "scientifically" support his claims.
 18. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 16.
 19. As described in Raven, "Womanhouse," 55, 58. See also Colette, *Chéri*, 1920, trans. Janet Flanner (New York: Boni, 1929). In the *Womanhouse* catalogue and in later references to *Womanhouse*, names of the characters in the novel—Léa and Chéri—are often misspelled, e.g., Leah's Room refers to Léa.
 20. Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 18-19.
 21. Chicago called these "maintenance pieces"; see *Through the Flower*, 122.
 22. Quoted in Raven, *Crossing Over*, 25.
 23. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT, 1994), 14-26, 43-51. Recent scholars have questioned the ideology of separate spheres and its relation to actual lived experience. Both Elizabeth Wilson, "The Invisible Flâneur," *New Left Review* 191 (January/February 1992): 90-110; and Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1999) argue that the ideology is more discursive than prescriptive.
 24. Halina Pasierbska, *Dolls' Houses* (Haverfordwest, Engl.: Shire Publ., 1997), 3, 9.
 25. Jet Pijzel-Dommisse, *The 17th-Century Dolls' Houses of the Rijksmuseum* (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1994), 38.
 26. Chicago and Schapiro, *Womanhouse*, n.p.
 27. See Carol Duncan, "Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting," 1973, reprinted in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harper and Row, 1982), 292-313. She discusses the connection between male sexuality and the sexualization of female models.
 28. See Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences," (1913), in Robert Herbert, ed. *Modern Artists on Art* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1964): 35; Anna Chave, "New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism," *Art Bulletin* 76:4 (December 1994): 601; and Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), 59.
 29. *Sixteen Windows* was one of several grid paintings Schapiro made. Begun as "box paintings," using collage and surrealist abstraction, they were eventually—after much internal debate and anxiety—brought more in line with the hard-edged minimalism of the period. See Thalia Gouma-Peterson, *Miriam Schapiro: Shaping the Fragments of Art and Life* (New York: Abrams, 1999), 61. See also Anna Chave, "Minimalism and the Rhetoric of Power," *Arts Magazine* 64:5 (January 1990): 44-63; and Chicago, *Through the Flower*, 27-53.
 30. Sandra Sider, "Femmeage: The Timeless Fabric Collage of Miriam Schapiro," *Fiberarts* 32:1 (Summer 2005): 40, reports that the artist began working with her "femmeage" technique (collages using fabric and paint) in 1971.
 31. Alison Ravertz, "A View from the Interior," *A View from the Interior: Feminism, Women, and Design*, eds. Judy Attfield and Pat Kirkham (London: Women's Press, 1989), 187-205. She argues that women have had little control over home design, and that houses are symbols of men's wealth and status.
 32. Norma Broude refers to it as a Persian interior in "The Pattern and Decoration Movement," *The Power of Feminist Art*, 208. Interestingly, *The Dollhouse* was altered to its present (and best known) configuration after *Womanhouse* was destroyed. In the original arrangement the *Seraglio* was adjacent to the artist's studio, perhaps referencing the sexualization of female models. Miriam Schapiro, letter to the author, January 18, 2000.
 33. Faith Wilding, "The Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," *The Power of Feminist Art*, 38.
 34. Griselda Pollock, "Screening the 1970s: Sexuality and Representation," *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 161. Scholars in the 1970s made similar assumptions about feminist art. For example, when Lynda Benglis's *Nude Self-Portrait with Dildo* was published in the November 1974 issue of *Artforum*, Cindy Nemser called Benglis an anti-feminist who was making a desperate attempt to gain male approval of her body. Nemser, "Lynda Benglis: A Case of Sexual Nostalgia," *Feminist Art Journal* 3:4 (Winter 1974-75): 7, 23.
 35. See, for example, Amelia Jones, ed., *Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago's Dinner Party in Feminist Art History*; also Amelia Jones, "Sexual Politics," 14.
 36. Broude and Garrard, "Conversations with Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro," in their *The Power of Feminist Art*, 66-67.

NANCY SPERO'S MUSEUM INCURSIONS

Isis on the Threshold

By Deborah Frizzell

*"... the body is a symbol and a hieroglyph, in a sense,
an extension of language."*

Nancy Spero, 1987

For nearly sixty years, Nancy Spero (b. 1926), a key "first generation" feminist artist and activist, has demonstrated a consistent and passionate engagement with contemporary political, social, and cultural concerns as well as with the construction of historical memory. Spero's paintings have chronicled wars and apocalyptic violence, and articulated visions of ecstatic rebirth and possibility. Her pioneering creation of a figurative, cross-cultural lexicon of the histories and mythologies representing women from prehistory to the present is depicted in her epic-scale scrolls from the early 1970s and her mural-scale banners and wall painting installations begun in the 1980s. Spero guides the viewer through historical-psychological time frames on the momentum of associations and metaphor, gesture, and unearthly mutations, achieved by an array of collage, painting, and printmaking techniques. She integrates a hybrid hieroglyphics into a web of relational graphic, architectural, and discursive contexts. In these Speroesque spaces lurk fractured visual/textual narratives brought into focus by an exemplary time-traveler, a scavenger of the first rank, who observes, apprehends, and critiques both the particular details and broad sweep of cultural histories.

Nancy Spero began her career in Chicago, where she grew up. After excelling in studio art classes at New Trier High School, a highly regarded and progressive public school, she found her real milieu at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where she graduated in 1949. Spero's teachers included the Bauhaus-trained painter Paul Wieghardt and renowned printmaker William Stanley Hayter; her peers included June Leaf, Ellen Lanyon, and a young G.I. just returned from service in World War II, Leon Golub. Spero and Golub became comrades-in-arms, united in their search for a resonant, new figurative expression strong enough to communicate the profound traumas of a brutalized postwar world. Both artists looked to the examples of Jean Dubuffet and Alberto Giacometti's figuration as well as to earlier German and Austrian expressionism. After graduation Spero continued to study painting during a year in Paris at the École des Beaux-Arts and at the atelier of André Lhote. In 1951, soon after

her return to the United States, Spero and Golub (1922-2004) married and settled in Chicago, living and painting in a converted two-story garage.

Spero had local solo exhibitions of her painterly, expressionistic figure paintings in 1951, 1952 and 1953. Through the sale of their paintings and a generous gift from a patron, Spero and Golub were able to live and paint in Italy from 1956 to 1957, while also raising their two boys. Spero painted at night after their daytime excursions and was able to get help with caring for their sons. It was in Florence and Ischia that Spero became intrigued with the ancient and classical images of goddesses that would inform her later work. Finding a more artistically varied and receptive atmosphere for their figurative painting in Europe than in a New York art world dominated by second-generation Abstract Expressionism and emerging Pop art, Spero and Golub left for Paris in 1959. They stayed for five years. Spero flourished in Paris: their third son was born there and she had three major solo exhibitions at Galerie Breteau (1962, 1964, and 1968). During this prolific period, Spero painted dark existentialist canvases in a series entitled Paris Black Paintings (1959-1964), depicting mythic themes: mothers and children, embracing lovers, solitary prostitutes, and hybrid, human-animal goddesses.

Returning to New York in 1964, Spero found a very different America from the one she had left. The Vietnam War was raging and the Civil Rights Movement was exploding. Affected by the horrific images broadcast nightly on television, Spero painted startlingly immediate images with gouache and ink on paper, executed rapidly, linking the themes of sexual obscenity, racism, and the destruction of war. Combined with the scatological language of war and the political-speak of governments, she painted and collaged defecating, phallic bombs, anthropomorphic helicopters pointing like forefingers at targets below, and mutant humans spewing paroxysms of death and chaos. These small paintings and collages on paper, her War Series (1966-1970), are now recognized as among the most sustained and powerful group of works in a genre of history painting that condemns war and its real and lasting consequences.

In the New York art world of the mid-1960s, Spero discovered there was no audience for such ferocious and disturbing paintings by a woman:

I felt silenced as an artist, with no dialogue; there were no venues to show work. The silencing of women's voices in society was pervasive. To counteract this silence and to have a voice, I became an active participant in the art world in the late 1960s and early 1970s, joining women artists' action and discussion groups, such as WAR [Women Artists in Revolution, a splinter group of the male-dominated Art Workers' Coalition, AWC] in 1969, the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists [which emerged from AWC and WAR in 1970], and A.I.R. Gallery [Artists in Residence], the first all-women's cooperative gallery in New York, founded in 1971. We analyzed women's status in the art world, the collusion of power among the galleries, museums, critics, collectors, and auctions houses; how the "heroes" are kept on top. In these women's groups we took action, picketing the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1970, and the Museum of Modern Art; we wrote manifestoes for parity and more exhibition opportunities, joined abortion-rights marches and anti-war marches. Our actions were all of a piece.²

Spero's consciousness raising activities and solidarity with her feminist peers gave her confidence to pursue alternative artistic approaches and venues. She and her artist colleagues opened the doors of A.I.R. Gallery in SoHo on September 16, 1972, with a membership of twenty-two women, including co-founders Barbara Zucker, Dotty Attie, Susan Williams, Mary Grigoriadis and Maude Boltz, and herself. Spero was forty-six years old.

By 1971 Spero had developed her pictographic language of gesture and motion in her signature scroll paintings. Although her collaged and painted scrolls were Homeric in both scope and depth, as a feminist artist, she shunned the grandiose in content as well as style, relying instead on intimacy and immediacy. In order to reveal the historical continuum of politically repressive strategies underlying the enduring patriarchal mythologies, Spero methodically researched history and ancient mythology. She was determined to *re-present* previously obscured women's histories, to question dominant cultural mythologies and stereotypes, and to trace literary references to women's political and social conditions via her expressive figuration. Having both the camaraderie and the open, physical space of A.I.R. as a public venue, Spero was able to take over the gallery space for her solo exhibitions, to unfurl her scrolls as she wished, push-pinning her new work, *Codex Artaud*, continuously around the four walls of the gallery in 1973.

In her scroll paintings on paper, *Codex Artaud* (1971-72), *The Hours of the Night* (1974), *Torture of Women* (1976), and *Notes on Time on Women* (1979), Spero hand-printed and collaged images and texts to form unfurling visual epics: nonlinear and nonhierarchical compendiums which the viewer could enter at any point. Her paper panels, glued end-to-end and push-pinned around gallery and museum walls, violated the normative "masculinist" scale, valued materials, and arrangement of discrete framed paintings. By 1974 Spero chose to depict only women, to conceptually shift the universal representation of "mankind" to the female subject, whose representation had been cast heretofore as the eternal other. Challenging the



Fig. 1. Nancy Spero, *Hymn to Isis, Koptos Gateway Banners* (2003), two hand-printed silk banners, 133" x 43" and 135" x 63." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy the Artist and Galerie Lelong, NY, L-R 12.2005. Photo: 2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

canonical language which originated during the patriarchal overthrow of goddess mythology in the ancient world, Spero deployed inversion. In horizontal scrolls such as *The First Language* (1979-81), over 190-feet long, the artist performed a poetic reconstruction of the diversity of representations of women from the ancient to the contemporary world, validating multiple subjectivities of female experience and establishing female pleasure as a feminist subject. Snatching figures from a wide range of sources—ancient mythology, mass media, art history, and literature—she repainted, cut, and reworked the figures within new contexts.³

Harnessing a capacious imaginative energy and singular determination, Spero unraveled and then mined the full range of power relations as depicted in centuries of patriarchal representations of women set against a foreground of transformed, ancient matriarchal symbols. In 1987, following retrospective exhibitions of her work in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada, the artist created images of women protagonists that leapt from the scroll surface to the wall surface, refiguring representational forms of women over time and engaging in a dialogue with architectural space. Spero's

wall paintings in Chicago, Vienna, Dresden, Toronto, Madrid, and Derry form poetic reconstructions of the diversity of representations of women, validating a subjectivity of female experience by mapping the terrain of the social body.

In a series of large-scale wall paintings begun in the 1980s, Spero expanded the prescriptive categories of masculinist history and mural painting by deploying a distinctive feminist lexicon of representation via image/text and figure/ground conjunctions conceived in relation to specific architectural and historical environments. By fragmenting and condensing multiple time frames and by juxtaposing schematic figures of differing scale and historical eras, the artist examined the themes of woman's witnessing and commemoration as well as collective and individual memory.

Spero's most recent feminist incursion within an architectural space freighted with historical meaning is installed in the Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) in Boston. A pair of hand-printed Shantung silk banners permanently installed in the museum's Egyptian Galleries, Spero's *Koptos Gateway Banners* (2003; Fig. 1), represents a culmination of the artist's core feminist themes and iconography developed over decades. Spero was commissioned to create an installation on the massive sandstone Koptos Gateway (170-116 B.C.) in the Monumental Sculpture Gallery. Rita E. Freed, the MFA's Norma-Jean Calderwood Curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art, extended the invitation to Spero after attending a 2001 lecture by the artist about her work. Boston's Egyptian collection contains over sixty thousand objects and is one of the outstanding collections in the world. To celebrate the centennial of the Ancient Egyptian Department, Freed embarked on a daring challenge: to invite a contemporary artist to create a dialogue with the past and to make the resulting artwork a permanent part of the Ancient Gallery. Spero responded with a sensuous hand-printed textile installation of vivid hues, adorned with her "cast of characters," and verses from the *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae*.⁴

This article traces the origin of recurring goddess images in the artist's trans-historical iconography, her "cast of characters," which reappear in her *Koptos Gateway Banners* as gestural and figural mutations interacting within the museum's framework. These iconographic dramatis personae build a multi-faceted "portrait" of the artist as she constructs her own artistic persona.

The richly colored *Koptos Gateway Banners* (Pl. 7) hang from the lintels of the Ptolemaic-era Koptos Gateway, constructed with blocks of carved and painted sandstone. The ancient Egyptian relief carvings on the gateway depict Ptolemy VIII making offerings to Isis and Min, the chief gods of the town of Koptos, located on a main land route to the Red Sea ports. Spero's two vertically oriented, double-sided silk banners are loosely suspended from monofilaments secured to the reconstructed Koptos Gateway's front and rear lintels (Pl. 8). The artist's hand-printed images and text excerpts from the *Hymn to Isis* appear on both sides of the two banners, creating four compositions with elaborated and interrelated iconography and themes (Pl. 9).⁵ Spero's female images are culled from her own paintings and drawings, from art books, magazines, and photographs of objects from the museum's Egyptian Collection.

Spero first studied ancient Egyptian artifacts while an art

student at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. When she began her studio art classes in 1945, the Art Institute was already the Midwest's oldest and largest art museum and school, with internationally renowned collections of Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art; paintings, sculpture, prints and decorative arts from the Middle Ages through the 1900s and Asian art. Classes were often held in the Art Institute's galleries and the students were free to roam the collections. Spero recalls, "We'd go down into the bowels of the museum to school everyday and there would be huge classic casts in this big hall, and the temporary exhibits of student work. We would go into the museum any time we liked. I always had the feeling that as a potential artist and as an art student I had access to museums."⁶ The Art Institute's art objects became as much a part of everyday learning as textbooks, studios, and libraries. The notion that artists should necessarily engage in ongoing dialogues and interpretive critiques inspired by museum collections became a leitmotif in Spero's oeuvre as a result of this early exposure. As repositories of multiple cultures, objects, and historical narratives, museums became for Spero an impetus to artistic exploration in relation to contemporary art-making processes and themes.⁷

Spero also was intrigued by the formal and conceptual aspects of ancient Egyptian art—especially the painted reliefs and papyrus scrolls—which offered an alternative aesthetic to the Western tradition of painting and its conventions of linear perspective. Even as a student Spero was attracted to the formal and thematic implications of the scrolled papyrus format and Egyptian compositional devices such as the spatial divisions of rectangular rows or "registers," the stylization of figures and hieratic scale, and to the integration of figure scenes with text. The *Egyptian Book of the Dead* (ca. 332-30 B.C.), an example of which is in the collection of the Art Institute's Oriental Institute, has been especially important for Spero as a visual resource.⁸ Continuing her study of the *Book of the Dead*, she added books on the subject to her studio library. She read and annotated English translations of the spells, hymns, and prayers that were recited to ease the journey of the dead through the underworld and into rebirth.⁹ Spero was developing her own pictographic "language of gesture and motion," a figurative oeuvre informed by ancient Egyptian stylistic devices such as the linearity of schematic figures from the *Book of the Dead* and the repetition of these stylized figures as signs in an esoteric alphabet.¹⁰

In the early 1970s Spero began to fully deploy a contemporary scroll format as the pictorial ground on which to hand-print and paint her figures, escaping the confines of the traditional rectilinear picture plane. By gluing sheets of handmade archival and rice papers end to end, she formed epic-scale scrolls, beginning with her seminal work, *Codex Artaud* (Figs. 2 and 3). On the surface of this first scroll, Spero conjoined painted, hand-printed, and typewritten texts by the modern French avant-garde poet/dramatist Antonin Artaud, ventriloquizing his voice, accompanied by her own attenuated yet expressive figures, intersecting and miming the poet's anguished words of alienation and rage. As a marginalized "woman artist" in New York, the art capital of the world, Spero identified with Artaud's ravings and abuses. To express these feelings, the artist mingled phonographic and pictographic sign systems: "Image and text

are simultaneously and equally important and relevant." As Artaud brought language into direct contact with the body, so too did Spero mingle words and representations of the body physically. "The visual impact of the text is as crucial as the figures—both express strong content printed with a staccato rhythm—a varied, almost fractured disjunctive look. The images are extensions of the text—in some instances virtual hieroglyphs."¹¹ Spero emphasized text as a visual gesture and structuring agent as well as an aural component, while depicting her figures not as individual characters telling a story but as another kind of graphic sign system akin to hieroglyphics. In 1973, the art critic for *The Nation*, Lawrence Alloway, identified Spero's unique discursive language in *Codex Artaud* as a "remarkable compound of two kinds of signs in which the verbal text and visual interpenetrate."¹² Alloway went on to describe Spero's word/image conjunctions: "[The figures] do not turn the field of paper into a three-dimensional zone. They are *written*, even when they are exquisitely modeled. They are no less signs than the characters in the verbal passages."¹³

Spero has acknowledged her debt to the Egyptian scroll format and to its iconography: "When I started pasting the paper together for the 'Codex' [*Codex Artaud*] I was looking at Egyptian hieroglyphics—their methods of composition on walls and papyrus, to give me some ideas, and along the way I collected many images and references."¹⁴ She sought metaphorical references from the *Book of the Dead* to parallel the poet Artaud's extreme language and nightmarish, apocalyptic visions, and to format a disjunctive and fragmented poetry-in-space—to move into space via the complex matrix of horizontal and vertical scrolls, while relating her figures and pictorial paper "ground" to surrounding architectural elements. Spero adopted many Egyptian stylistic elements including hieratic schematic figures, cyclical or simultaneous timeframes, freeze-framed registers enclosing action, and the repetition of key figures to indicate their thematic centrality and movement through eternal or cyclical time.

For the *Codex Artaud* scroll, the artist created a key female protagonist who would reappear in many forms and guises over the next three decades: Nut, inspired directly by images and references to the ancient Egyptian goddess Nut, the mother of Isis. Nut, the female goddess of heavenly bodies, is often depicted on Egyptian tomb ceilings as a protector of the dead, providing meat and drink in burial chambers.¹⁵ As a mother goddess, Nut's "children" enter her mouth to re-emerge through her womb, setting in motion the endless cycles of life and death, day and night. Her mythic son Re, the sun god, is swallowed by her every evening and given new birth every morning.

Nut became a powerful figure for Spero, and she is depicted repeatedly on the *Koptos Gateway Banners*, as Isis's mother, creator of the world and mother of all gods, protector of the dead, and vehicle of resurrection. Her flattened, cream-colored silhouette outlined sketchily in black reappears on the banners in varying sizes, expanding and contracting, and taking on

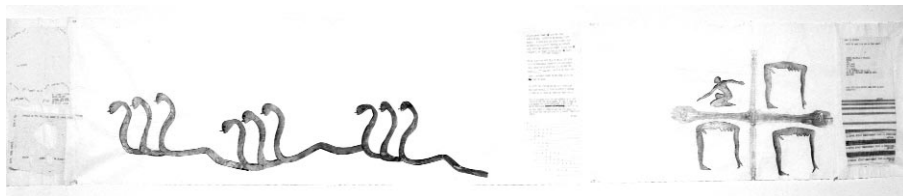


Fig. 2. Nancy Spero, *Codex Artaud XXV*, detail (1971-72), typewriter and painted collage on paper, 24" x 193." Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund 97.4. Photo: David Reynolds.

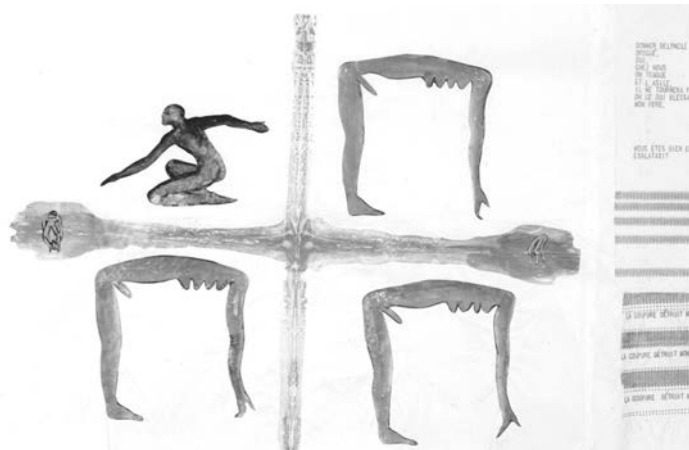


Fig. 3. Nancy Spero, *Codex Artaud XXV*, detail (1971-72), typewriter and painted collage on paper, 24" x 193." Williams College Museum of Art, Museum Purchase, Kathryn Hurd Fund 97.4. Photo: David Reynolds.

different orientations: floating celestially in her traditional position overhead in a swath of sapphire-blue, positioned under the gateway threshold; reclining on her back at the bottom of the inside back panel, where she emerges palms-up from the deep-blue "underworld" like a vessel; and on the right-hand margin of the outside back panel, arching toward the outer edge in repeated and stacked vertical scallops, as though climbing upward to form a decorative framework. Nut thus "circulates," repeated and dispersed within the registers and panels, transforming from one state to another, "moving" from one eternal or earthly timeframe to another, simultaneously functioning in her different aspects.

These repeated images of the goddess Nut are expressively hand-printed, that is, with varying hand pressures and inking techniques, orientations, and colors.¹⁶ An "aura" is created by means of over-printing and under-printing techniques, repetition, and compositional placement. Spero's printing method evokes a sense of aged layering, syncopated rhythms, and implied ritual processions. With each hand-printing, the goddess appears subtly varied, emphasizing her many incarnations and divine transformational aspect. By employing Egyptian stylistic elements and iconography, Spero adds resonance to the goddess Isis's mythological "ancestry" through the many variations of the ancient image of Nut depicted in



Fig. 4. Nancy Spero, *Hymn to Isis, Koptos Gateway Banners* (2003), two hand-printed silk banners, 133" x 43" and 135" x 63." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy the Artist and Galerie Lelong, NY, L-R 12.2005. Photo: 2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

tomb paintings—a monumental figure bending over the earth with her hands touching the eastern horizon and her feet the western horizon, an all-encompassing figure gracing fields of blue decorated with stars. In addition, the artist suggests a morphology of Nut/Isis, as mother goddesses descending from earlier prehistoric goddesses including the Mesopotamian Great Mother, Tiamat (from *The Tale of Gilgamesh*), representative of the originating female principle in mythology.¹⁷ Thus, the *Koptos Gateway Banners* are part of a continuum of re-presentation within Spero's oeuvre, an epic-scale refiguring of symbolic fragments stretching back to prehistoric and classical eras, emblematic of past myths and ceremonies but reconfigured within contemporary feminist perspectives.

Spero suggests the theme of origination by mingling the characters' forms to make hybrid creatures, morphing from Nut into another aspect of her mythic persona, the Sky Goddess. Printed on both the inside and outside of the rear panel of the banners, the figure of Nut is woven into a composite form, the Sky Goddess, which originated in *Codex Artaud* as an amalgam of Nut and the four-breasted Etruscan *She-Wolf* (ca. 500 B.C., Capitoline Museum, Rome). In contrast to the elegant form of Nut, Spero's image of the Sky Goddess is gawky, primitivistic, and grotesque; her lumpy silhouette arches over her children in an awkward, right-angled pose. According to legend, in the

origination story of Rome, the mythical She-Wolf suckled the orphaned Romulus and Remus (the sons of Mars, the god of war). Romulus grew up to slay his brother Remus, beginning a deadly martial tradition pitting brother against brother in a patriarchal struggle for power. The amalgam within the Sky Goddess image of different aesthetic echoes—prehistoric, ancient Egyptian and Etruscan—is characteristic of Spero's stylistic eclecticism. In addition, the artist suggests the interaction of the contrasting, irreconcilable psychological aspects of human consciousness. She reveals the underlying psychological dialectics embodied in ancient depictions of mythic hybrid goddesses representing dual aspects.¹⁸

In the *Koptos Gateway Banners*, Spero presents an updated origination myth celebrating the great goddess Isis by interweaving ancient and contemporary images, styles, and compositional strategies. As the four-breasted She-Wolf-cum-celestial-Nut, the Sky Goddess appears as a "doubled" image, emphasizing her duality and omnipresence. On the inside back panel, Spero printed her attenuated silhouette in a cerulean blue, followed by an ultramarine shadow Sky Goddess, a "double" sprouting three arms. On the outside back panel, the Sky Goddess is printed in verdant green, hopping behind a smaller version of herself, here a "double" in burnt sienna. The colors evoke an alternating desert dryness relieved by the cyclical fertility of an overflowing Nile riverbank. The artist repeats the fluctuating image of the Sky Goddess on the upper registers of the silk panels, a transcendent realm, emphasizing, as Spero notes, "the female transcending ... and becoming a symbol of resuscitation."¹⁹ The Sky Goddess traverses over and beyond the borders of panel registers, impinging on adjoining registers to interact with contemporary figures; the image of an athletic runner (Fig. 4) based on a magazine photograph of the Olympic track and field star Marion Jones heads straight towards the viewer in a frontal charge, multiplying herself in blue, black, purple and white; the repetitions of Jones's figure form a semicircular pattern, held aloft by the nimble hands of an inverted Nut. Printed on the outside of the same panel, a contemporary acrobat summersaults in an inverted opisthotonos posture, a pose symbolizing an ecstatic trance often depicted in ancient Egyptian tomb reliefs; this orientation of the rainbow-color acrobat serves to re-circulate the flow of the repeated images of Nut upward to merge with the depiction of Sky Goddess overhead.

Another goal of the artist is to recreate a sense of the drama and mystery of ancient rites performed within the Koptos Gateway. Spero explains, "In collaging these disparate figures, juxtaposing, repeating, I create ritual like events, action-movement—across the space of the extended linear ... format."²⁰ Within the subdivided vertical panels, Spero combines the "movement" of circulating figures with linear processions of ancient Egyptian-profiled figures ambling on the "horizon" of the horizontal registers. The panel registers are scaled to approximately the same size as the ancient gateway registers and are defined by the edges of colored swaths—stripes of red or borders of green and blue—like the bright colors that once adorned its Egyptian reliefs, visible today only as patches of faded color. The juxtaposed spaces within the registers are set in

freeze-frame motion by the artist's irregular but rhythmic scattering and overlapping of figures; images may appear to be flying up towards the gallery's skylight or gravely descending in mourning: "And so I could ideally use the space—real space to soar and to have freedom of space—to pause, for an image to pause, to have blank space and clusters of images—to create repetitions and rhythms and subtle shifts in the images themselves."²¹ Spero's contemporary compositional strategy is collage-like and contrasts with the static and predictable linear format of the Ptolemaic Egyptian artists, who sought clarity and order in their depictions.

The floating silk banners' composition and placement emphasizes ritual performance, magical incantations, and threshold processions. The original cult scenes on the Koptos Gateway depict the goddess Isis entering and inhabiting the temple dedicated to her: "Lady of Upper and Lower Egypt." Thus Spero prints images and aspects of Isis: Nut, Maat, Nekhbet, Egyptian lyre and flute players, ancient mourning women, the Sky Goddess, and the Eye of Re, associated with Isis, the mistress of heaven.²² In one register, Isis receives festive offerings from her son, the living Horus, Ptolemy VIII. As his crown indicates, Isis has given Ptolemy VIII victory over the north and south and all lands. In return, he purifies her sanctuary with sacred plants, the lotus and papyrus.²³ To Min and Isis he gives myrrh; to Isis and Osiris he offers cool water and incense. On the rear face of the gateway, he gives incense to the sky goddess Nut, delicately carved with fleshy breasts and protruding belly, with details of jewelry and headdresses—all elements which would have been articulated in color pigments.

Spero has "resurrected" the intense color of the original polychrome with her choice of luscious iridescent silks and colored textile inks. As Osiris was given the epithet, "Foremost of the Mansion of Gold," Spero employed golden silk as the ground on which she printed lines from the *Hymn to Isis*, descending in vertical lines from Nut's dome of heaven.²⁴ By selecting these shining fabrics, Spero sought to embody the flickering qualities of shifting, reflected light. In addition to these color and light effects, the artist references the layered eclecticism of Ptolemaic art—which had absorbed local Egyptian iconography and styles, an amalgam of Egyptian and Macedonian Greek influences—with her own transcultural array of appropriated female images. Spero's expressive figures are hand-printed to create a range of stylistic effects: schematically flat or modeled, transparent or opaque, flickering or eroding. These elusive qualities of Spero's figures echo the decay and temporal qualities of the Ptolemaic Gateway reliefs, reinstating an "aura" within Isis's threshold.

The artist's layering of iconography and visual effects reinforces the self-reflexive archaism of the Ptolemaic era—that culture's consciousness of its own ancient history and long list of former glories, maintained as a strong cultural identity during conquests or new administrations. Egyptian Isis cults, initiations, and ritual ceremonies continued into the Greco-Roman world. Hellenistic and Roman paganism subsumed related gods and goddesses of the Egyptian mysteries; the mythology of Isis was assimilated into various forms in hymns, ceremonies, divinations, and religious healing.²⁵ The ancient

symbolism of temple gateways and thresholds in the worship of the goddess Isis, linking cult initiates to the experiences of transformation and the trials of the afterlife, continued to be accompanied by the performance of short ritual plays, theatrical impersonations of gods and goddesses by priests and priestesses.²⁶ Spero echoes these performative aspects with her "processions" of Egyptian Mourning Women, repeated and over-printed on the bottom front panel and at the top rear panel—literally and figuratively circulating the initiate/viewer through the threshold of the underworld.²⁷

Spero combines her figures with verses from the *Hymn to Isis*, printed in blue letters hovering over ribbon-like pink lines. Issuing from the blue panel containing Nut's arched body at the top of the outside front panel, Spero prints on a long golden swath the calligraphic lines of cerulean blue letters forming the words of Isis:

I am Isis, the ruler of every land
I am the one called goddess (theos) by women
I calm the sea and make it surge
I separated the earth from the Heaven
I am in the rays of the sun
I conquer Destiny
Hail, O Egypt, that nourished me.²⁸

Knowing that the hymn was performed orally as well as fixed in written form, Spero initiated the flow of Roman letters downward as though issuing from Nut herself. The words descend in rows printed side-by-side. Below the golden register containing Isis's hymn is a band of vermilion, enclosing yet another register cradling a blue and white wave of Egyptian Mourning Women, each figure outlined in black, weeping and rocking in grief within an "underworld" that unfurls onto the base of the ancient stone gateway.

The ritual repetition of ancient Egyptian hymns as religious incantations evoked a sense of the eternal.²⁹ Spero echoes these rhythms by repeating lines from Isis's hymn onto several panels, as though in a choral refrain. On the inside of the front panel are more lines from the hymn, repeating those from the front panel while introducing new ones:

Hail, O Egypt
I am Isis, the ruler of every land
I showed the paths of the stars
I am in the rays of the sun
I conquer Destiny.³⁰

Repeating lines on different registers reinforces the themes relating to Isis's omniscient powers of creation and maintains the rhythmic repetitions mimicking incantations.

Spero weaves her female figures, as warp and weft threads, in and out of the pathways of the vertical, calligraphic lines of Isis's hymn. To create a sense of movement and infinite space within these vertical/horizontal axes, the artist often forms contrasting centrifugal patterns of figures sandwiched by horizontal friezes containing images of Hathor, Maat, and Nekhbet. The centrifugal pattern spinning outward from the



Fig. 5. Nancy Spero, *A Cycle in Time*, in progress (1995), hand-printed silk banner, 2016" x 30." Collection of the artist. Photo: David Reynolds.

middle of the cream-colored interior front panel is composed of repetitions of the figure of "La Renommée," redrawn from a photograph of the bronze statue made by the sixteenth-century French sculptor Pierre Biard.³¹ By making a centrifugal pattern comprising repeated images of "La Renommée," Spero mimics the movement of the allegorical trumpeter's sound waves traveling outward.

Viewers circumambulating the periphery and peeking into the gateway's threshold to view the artist's double-sided banners can not fail to notice the details of iconography and artisanship embodied in the ancient sandstone reliefs. Spero's installation complements the MFA's conservation and reconstruction of the Koptos Gateway, which highlights the painstaking process of archaeology. The metaphor of an archaeological dig emphasizes an *action* or a *process*, not a static object: a search, an uncovering and digging up of fragments, and a removal of shards in order to puzzle out symbols without fully known contexts. Spero references the archaeological dig as a process of uncovering and retelling a story in its recontextualization of fragments, which requires imaginative re-creation as well as scholarly evidence gathering.

It was Spero's early experiences at archaeological sites and in museums that informed not only her feminist iconography and themes but also her relational formats tied to architectural scale. While in Italy in the 1950s, Spero studied Egyptian, Greek, Etruscan, and Roman art in the museums and at archaeological sites. The House of the Vettii's brothel paintings and Pompeii's Villa of Mystery's sacred-erotic murals were catalysts for Spero's study of ancient and classical rituals and long dead rites of passage, contributing to her development of a contemporary feminist language to reveal socio-psychological transitions as

cyclical and dynamic, intrinsically embedded in all human societies while each local form evinces cultural specificity.³²

Spero discovered that the double-sided banner format was an ideal vehicle for investigating the cyclical and transitional in 1995, when she made her first textile banner, *A Cycle in Time* (Pl. 10), installed in the Residenzgalerie in Salzburg, Austria. *A Cycle in Time* became part of the artist's feminist project of uncovering historical and mythological women as active protagonists. Within a non-chronological timeframe, Spero employed a banner format to undermine linearity itself via fragmentation and disunity of timeframes within clearly set registers. The artist found it a natural transition to move from the format of paper scrolls to wall paintings, and then, to hanging textile banners. Printed on both sides and assembled and sewn in panels, the artist designed *A Cycle in Time* as luminescent and flexible. The brightly colored, horizontal banner was suspended from the ceiling of the Residenzgalerie with monofilaments in a horseshoe configuration, rippling overhead and echoing the ornamental accents defining Salzburg's baroque and rococo architectural

bounty.

A Cycle in Time was assembled in her New York studio. Arranging the hand-printed silk panels, secured by clothespins on a clothesline stretching the length of the studio (Fig. 5), Spero was able to compose the ensemble of panels and to view the banner in its entirety. Later, in 2003, Spero used the great height of the studio's ceiling to view the vertical trajectory of the *Koptos Gateway Banners* set against life-sized photographs of the Koptos Gateway (sent by Rita Freed, subsequent to the artist's initial walk-through of the Egyptian Galleries at the MFA with Freed and Department Assistant Sophia Teller).

Spero's process of working on her banners, draping the silk panels over a clothesline to compose them, and her literal use of figured textile demarcations of space intuitively reflects ideas expressed by the nineteenth-century German architect and theorist, Gottfried Semper. His theories trace the domestic origins of architecture to the draping of textiles over mobile armatures. He stressed the role of textiles as the beginning of domestic architecture—in cladding, clothing, carpets, and mats.³³ These textile origins are alluded to symbolically through ornamentation in the architecture of the Greeks and Romans.³⁴ Semper's two volume treatise, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics* (1860-63), suggested that textiles were the primary space creators in prehistoric nomadic cultures.³⁵ The wall, as an essential element of spatial demarcation, had its genesis in clothing for the body, according to Semper, who concluded that textile walls were true representations of the "spatial idea."³⁶ Spero's choice of silk material on which to elucidate her word/image conjunction, weaving Isis's hymn with female imagery, plays on the themes explicit in Semper's art historical analyses. The two vertical banners draped from the

threshold lintels of the Koptos Gateway relate directly to Egyptian post and lintel temple forms as well as to the human body making its way through the gateway, which links the earthly / temple sphere to the transcendent sphere. Spero's selection of silk fabric references textile clothing, while the panels' vertical orientation, hand-printed with nude and clad figures-in-motion, references the human form.

Semper related spatial demarcations to the concept of a fence as a flexible protective fold. In an article on Semper's theory, the art historian Michael Muecke writes that the word "fence" is "related to the seam and sewing. *Saum* (seam) in German means border, edge, margin, and outskirts, or fringe, of a town. In Semper's theory the seam occupied the middleground between weld, suture or joint (*Naht*), and the band. 'Fold' and 'Fence' mark the simultaneous separation and joining of exterior and interior, wall and roof."³⁷ Spero's contemporary formal strategies in the design and construction of her banners echo Semper's notions of seaming and the functions of architecture, which the artist employs to dramatize the sacred Egyptian threshold's purpose as a gateway to/for the goddess Isis. Spero folds and seams the joins of her figured silk panels to occupy a micro-thin middle-ground, embodying an infinitesimal boundary, paradoxically separating and conjoining perceived oppositions: inner/outer, private/public, mythic/historical.³⁸ Spero's *Koptos Gateway Banners*, as figurative "cycles in time," constitute in their material construction and installation an indeterminate realm of possibility, a materialization of a symbolic imaginary space. Evolving simultaneously as structure and ornament on the artist's studio worktable and clothesline—implying Semper's oscillation of vertical/figure/wall and horizontal/ground/carpet—Spero's banner undermines the dichotomy of these binary paradigms even as it illustrates them. The artist reveals the folding and seaming of her banners, while highlighting the self-reflexivity of hand-printing techniques on silk (cropping, overprinting, underprinting, and skewing registration).

Spero's ongoing feminist lexicon of the re-presentation of women throughout history, influenced especially by her early study of museum objects and archaeological sites, has been expanded by the challenge of installing a permanent artwork in a formal visual dialogue with the Koptos Gateway within the Egyptian Galleries of the MFA in Boston. Spero has approached the museum as a shared site of history, memory, and identity, and as a unique repository of multiple cultures from which feminist artists may draw inspiration, energy, and ideas as well as critically analyze museum display and collections. Her intensely profound engagement with history, mythology, and contemporary cultural issues coalesces within the Koptos Gateway, where a sense of "place" predominates and becomes the "ground" for thematic and formal discovery. As the art historian Erika Suderberg has recently discussed in her historiography of site-specific installation art and its conceptual bases, this multifaceted genre foregrounds artistic processes and actions, inhabiting and integrating the perimeters of space in order to reconfigure perceptions of architecture, objects, and space.³⁹ By printing her stylized and discursive cross-cultural female figures in relationship to the Koptos Gateway's layers of

historical resonance, the artist depicts both past and present human experiences as tied inexorably to dynamic performative spaces, to visual representations and to the body. Spero reconfigures symbolic fragments from the gateway emblematic of past ceremonies and sacred spaces, and reinterprets them within contemporary feminist perspectives, producing an altogether new visual language that is somehow recognizable, producing an echo of the past, but in a new voice. In the process, Spero's orchestration within the Koptos Gateway brings new life to ancient fragments, closing the gap between past and present. •

Deborah Frizzell is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art History at William Paterson University. She is currently completing a manuscript about the work and life of Nancy Spero.

NOTES

Special thanks to Nancy Spero and her assistant Samm Kunce, and to Rita Freed, Curator at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Sophia Teller, Department Assistant.

1. Nancy Spero quoted in Jeanne Siegel, "Nancy Spero: Woman as Protagonist," *Arts Magazine* 62 (September, 1987): 13.
2. From Nancy Spero's acceptance speech at the 9th Annual Recognition Awards Ceremony of the Committee for Women in the Arts of the College Art Association, February 20, 2004, delivered (in Spero's absence) by the author.
3. See discussions of the emergence and diversity of feminist representations of the Great Goddess in the 1970s in Whitney Chadwick, *Woman, Art, and Society*, 3rd ed. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard, eds, *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s, History and Impact* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994); Kate Horsfield, "Interview with Nancy Spero," *Profile* 3, no. 1 (January 1983): 2-24; Jo Anna Isaak, *Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Lucy Lippard, *From the Center* (New York: EP Dutton, 1976); Corrine Robins, "Nancy Spero, 'Political' Artist of Poetry and Nightmare," *Feminist Art Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1975): 19-22, 48; and Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996).
4. Louis V. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1988).
5. Spero prints lines 3a, 10, 12, 13, 14, 43, 44, 45, 55, and 57, from the aretology of Kyme from the M-text translated in Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 140-41.
6. Quoted in Robert Enright, "On the Other Side of the Mirror; A Conversation with Nancy Spero," *Border Crossings* 19, no. 4, (November 2000): 21.
7. Spero has employed as sources for her painted and printed interpretations of these goddesses the following illustrated texts located in her studio library: *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, ed. Carol Andrews, trans. Raymond O. Faulkner (London: British Museum Press, 1972); E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians or Studies in Egyptian Mythology*, v. 1 (New York: Dover, 1969), see especially the goddesses Maat, 418, and Nekhebit (Nekhbet), 438; Albert Champdor, ed. *Le Livre des Morts* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1963), see especially the Eye of Horus, 120; Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, Bollingen Series XLVII, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), especially the goddess Nut swallowing and giving birth to the Sun god, 36; Lucie Lamy, *Egyptian Mysteries* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1981), especially the goddess Nut in the Greenfield Papyrus, British Museum, London, 42; Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of*

- the Goddess: *Evolution of an Image* (New York: Viking Arkana, 1991), especially the goddess Maat on lintel at entrance to the tomb of Nefertari, 261.
8. *Book of the Dead*, Egypt, Ptolemaic Period, ca. 332-30 B.C., papyrus and ink, 30.0 cm H, 72.0 cm W, Gift of Mrs. Elizabeth Milbank Anderson, 1919, OIM 10486; Collection of The Art Institute of Chicago.
 9. See in Spero's library E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Magic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1971); Albert Champdor, ed. *Le Livre des Morts; The Egyptian Book of the Dead: Documents in the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publication 82* (Chicago, 1960).
 10. Siegel, "Nancy Spero: Woman as Protagonist, 13.
 11. Quoted in Erika Hoffmann Koenige, "Interview with Nancy Spero" [March 5, 1991], in Sabine Fehleemann, *Buchstaeblich: Bild und Wort in der Kunst heute*, exh. cat. (Wuppertal, Germany: Von der Heydt-Museum, 1991), 100-01.
 12. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, (April 2, 1973): 445.
 13. Lawrence Alloway, "Art," *The Nation*, (September 25), 1976: 282.
 14. Quoted in Jon Bird, "Part II, Codex Artaud' – the phallic tongue," *Nancy Spero*, exh. cat. (London: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1987), 25.
 15. See for example, Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*, Bollingen Series XLVIII, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), ill. 36, in Spero's library.
 16. Because of the crippling effects of advanced rheumatoid arthritis on Spero, her studio assistants, Mary-Beth Gregg and Crystalle Lacouture (both artists), hand-print her images. Spero assembled these individual, colored silk registers to form four large, multi-colored vertical panels, which were then sewn together by the New York costume designer, Patricia Murphy, to create the two final double-sided silk banners. Spero's figures were hand-printed on the silk with textile inks, which the artist mixed to achieve a variety of aesthetic and symbolic effects. The inks are applied onto the relief surfaces of zinc or polymer printer's plates with a roller or brayer. All of Spero's figures, her "cast of characters," have been photo-transferred ahead of time onto the zinc plates or laser-printed onto the polymer plates, ready to be inked and pressed onto the silk to print a relief image. Under Spero's watchful eye, the studio assistants press the inked relief plates onto the silk surface to hand-print the images. Spero orchestrates the whole process from start to finish and adds the final touches of ink.
 17. See Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians*, 327.
 18. Spero began to depict conflicting dualities embodied within single mythological and human figures in the 1950s; she painted *At Their Word the Sick Woman* (1957-58), while reading Joseph Campbell's popular book on world mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1956); and *Great Mother Birth* (1962), while reading Erich Neumann's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955). See also in Spero's library, Lucie Lamy, *Egyptian Mysteries*; Merlin Stone, *Ancient Mirrors of Womanhood: Our Goddesses and Heroine Heritage* (New York: Sibylline Books, 1979); Clifford Geertz, ed., *Myth, Symbol, and Culture* (New York: Norton and Co., 1971).
 19. Quoted from a September 1976 interview with the artist, see Carol J. DePasquale, "Project/Thesis: The Work of Nancy Spero" (unpublished master's thesis, Hunter College, 1977), 22.
 20. Quoted in Keller Cushing Freeman, *Nancy Spero: 1993 Emrys Journal*, 12. In 1975, Spero made an epic scale paper scroll, *Torture of Women*, in which she first used metal plates in a letterpress technique to hand-print her figures, allowing her to repeat figures like an esoteric alphabet. Her first metal plate depicted the *Sky Goddess*. Spero told Freeman, "With these [zinc] plates I hand-print and cut-out many figures – stockpiling them for future use," 12.
 21. Quoted in Patricia C. Phillips, "Nancy Spero," *Art Views*, 14, pt. 2-3 (Spring-Summer 1988): 67.
 22. See Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 128-133.
 23. See a full description by Nancy Thomas, with essays by Gerry D. Scott III and Bruce G. Trigger, *The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and American Research Center in Egypt and Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 218-21.
 24. *Ibid.*, 221.
 25. Reinhold Merkelbach, *Isis regina – Zeus Sarapis. Die griechisch-aegyptische Religion nach den Quellen dargestellt* (Stuttgart-Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1995).
 26. *Ibid.*, 329-31, 342-47.
 27. The source of the Egyptian Mourning Women is a motif from the tomb of the scribe Ramose who worked for Ramses II in the 13th century B.C.
 28. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 140-41.
 29. Nazli Madkour, "Spero's Hieroglyphs," *Nancy Spero, 7th International Cairo Biennale 1998* (Cairo: 7th International Cairo Biennale, 1999), 14-17.
 30. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 140-41.
 31. Thanks to Mary-Beth Gregg for detailing the source of this image.
 32. See R.A.S. Seaford, "The Mysteries of Dionysus at Pompeii," in Diotima, www.stoa.org/diotima/, February 1, 2000, first published in H.W. Stubbs, ed., *Pegasus: Classical Essays from the University of Exeter* (1981), 52-67; Richard Cavendish, ed., *An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Mythology* (New York: Crescent Books, 1980); Arturo Stenico, *Roman and Etruscan Painting* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).
 33. Gottfried Semper, "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts or Practical Aesthetics," in *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 181-263. See also Mark Wigley, *White Walls, Designer Dresses: The Fashioning of Modern Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995), and Beatriz Colomina, *Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).
 34. Michael Muecke, "Mobile Foundations: A Reading of Complex Surfaces in Gottfried Semper's Treichler Laundry Ship," *Aurora, The Journal of the History of Art* 2 (2001), 72-113. See also Gottfried Semper *Wissenschaft, Industrie und Kunst, und andere Schriften uber Architektur, Kunsthandwerk und Kunstunterricht* (1851) (Mainz and Berlin), 77.
 35. Semper, "Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts," 181-263.
 36. Muecke, "Mobile Foundations," 95.
 37. Muecke, "Mobile Foundations," 92.
 38. See Marcel Duchamp's discussion of the "infrathin" as a related concept of the infinitesimal screen or scrim both dividing and seaming as a hinge in Paul Matisse, ed., *Marcel Duchamp, Notes* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983), 9.
 39. Erika Suderberg, ed., "Introduction: On Installation and Site Specificity," in *Space, Site, Installation: Situating Installation Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 1-22.

WOMAN'S ART JOURNAL

Subscribe to Woman's Art Journal today.
See details at <http://womansartjournal.org/>

Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History after Postmodernism

edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard
University of California, 2005

Reviewed by Ute L. Tellini

Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard's book of essays is an excellent complement to their two previous anthologies: *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany* (1982), and *Expanding the Discourse: Feminism and Art History* (1992). The first was primarily concerned with interpretations distorted by sexual bias from major periods of Western art history; the second engaged the advent and application of postmodern theory. The problem, the editors state in the introduction to their latest volume, is that postmodernism, grounded in the masculinist principles of Freud, Lacan, and Saussure, benefited the status quo and contributed to a distorted picture of female participation in culture. As feminist art history was absorbed into the postmodern category of "gender studies" (including men's studies, gay and lesbian perspectives, queer theory), gender became "only one of many factors in a constantly shifting and evolving...pattern of power relationships" (1), write Broude and Garrard. Women's agency was endangered. Art historians, they charge, have been:

...deferential to postmodern skepticism about the modernist heroizing of individual artists, [and] have focused less and less on the work and agency of individual women artists, shying away especially from the idea of a feminist expression grounded in women's real life experiences. The result has been the steady erosion and suppression of an activist, reformist feminism within an increasingly theoretical and largely masculinist postmodernism (2).

The latest volume focuses on women who have exercised agency as artists, patrons, viewers, and tastemakers, and "how masculine culture acted and con-

tinues to act to negate and neutralize those efforts" (3).

The twenty-three essays in this volume cover the period from the Renaissance to the present, and, with some notable exceptions, concern mainly Western and North American art and artists. Some writings deepen our understanding of familiar works; others explore new ground. Throughout, most of the artworks discussed are reproduced in high quality black and white images.

The prevailing view during the Renaissance was that women were incapable of producing art, and those who did were celebrated as "marvels of nature" and "virtuosi." Women artists were frequently dismissed as dilettantes, defined by their familial relationship with a male artist, and sometimes punished for their transgressions.

In "Here's Looking at Me," Mary Garrard sheds new light on Sofonisba Anguissola's (1532-1625) puzzling self-portrait entitled *Bernardino Campi Painting Sofonisba Anguissola* (late 1550s). Is Anguissola paying homage to her former teacher, or is she making a subversive statement in response to the prevailing male view that creativity is the exclusive domain of men? Garrard proposes that Anguissola is responding to these infuriating ideas, and what we see is perhaps "an example of female 'mimicry,' as defined by Luce Irigaray, in which a woman artist ... acts out the roles of femininity, in order to expose, subversively, the thing that she mimics" (28).

Babette Bohn's essay, "The Antique Heroines of Elisabetta Sirani," features that artist's images of Timoclea, Judith, and Cleopatra, celebrating their courage and heroism. Sirani (1638-1665) depicts the women fully dressed, in contrast to the seductive nudes favored by male artists for the same subjects; she focuses on the women's powerful actions, their agency, not their bodies. Sirani's history paintings were unusual, as most women painters of her time were relegated to portraiture.



Fig. 1. Cover illustration, detail from Jacques-Louis David, *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799). Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, New York.

With access to her father's library, she knew the classics, so that when in her *Portia Wounding Her Thigh* (1664) the heroine shows an uncovered leg, Bohn says it is because Sirani is following Plutarch's description.¹

In "Artemisia's Hand," Mary Garrard focuses on the "forceful gestures of Artemisia's depicted female characters in order to demonstrate the artist's abiding interest in expressing female agency" (5). Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652/53) painted "working hands," energized with muscles and sinews that reinforced the activities depicted in her paintings, she writes. "The painter signals her artistic presence to us through subtle and witty gestures of the hand" (5). Garrard's insightful preoccupation with the style of Gentileschi's hands was instrumental in attributing three new paintings to Artemisia.

In "Learning to be Looked at, A Portrait of (the Artist as) a Young Woman in Agnes Merlet's *Artemisia*," Sheila Ffolliott considers that, in Merlet's film on Gentileschi's life, the artist is not the one who looks—or paints—but rather receives the gaze. The film opens with a close-up of an eye—not the artist's but the eye of the camera (operated by a male)—which then caresses Artemisia's nude body by candlelight, and later, lingers at her cleavage. Regrettably,

Merlet distorted the facts of Artemisia's famous trial, so that in the film, instead of denying the rape, Agostino Tassi confesses and is convicted. We may wonder, along with Mary Garrard, about the responsibility of art to truth in an age when so many people rely on the popular media for their historical knowledge.

The next two essays concern two French queens, both important patrons of the arts. Geraldine A. Johnson, in "Pictures Fit For a Queen, Peter Paul Rubens and the Marie de' Medici Cycle," discusses a series of large paintings commissioned by Marie de' Medici. Painted between 1622-25, they were intended to celebrate the patron's power and agency in a manner that combined reality with mythology and allegory. As Ruben's pictorial language was based on the symbolic display of the female nude (usually assuming a male viewer), when the heroine was a woman, there was conflict between the message and the visual language used to represent it (103). The warrior queen in *Marie de' Medici as Queen Triumphant* has one breast exposed, as juxtaposing female flesh with shiny armor sexualizes the work and undermines her military prowess ostensibly being celebrated. Still, Marie looks confidently out at the viewer and holds our gaze. Johnson addresses "[t]he ambiguities associated with the female gaze, with the role of art in depicting female sexuality and power" (113).

The exhibition of Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun's (1755-1842) painting *Marie-Antoinette en chemise* in the Salon of 1783 caused a scandal, according to Mary Sheriff in "The Portrait of the Queen." The subject's status as queen was nowhere recognizable. By definition, the costume of the twenty-seven-year-old queen—a fashionable English cotton summer dress and straw hat—was listed in the 1786 *Cabinet des Modes* as informal wear, appropriate for walks in the park or picnics (121). (Curiously, this *robe en chemise* was far less revealing than most court dresses with their exaggerated décolletés.) According to French court etiquette, royalty had no right to a private life (133), and her detractors and critics, suspicious of the Austrian-born queen, made her an early scapegoat for the monarchy's corruption and decline. The

portrait precipitated a host of libelous charges, from extravagance to sexual promiscuity, and even incest.

In "Depoliticizing Women, Female Agency, the French Revolution, and the Art of Boucher and David," Erica Rand ponders how one artist who paints political pictures and another who does not both manage to disempower women. In *The Death of Marat* (1793), Jacques-Louis David cut out not only Marat's female assassin, Charlotte Corday, but also half of the letter she had sent him outlining her political purpose in seeking an audience. This omission conveyed the impression that Corday was pleading for Marat's protection for personal reasons, not for political expediencies. By this ruse (he knew the truth) David removed Corday from the political arena, symbolically erasing this heroine/assassin from the story of the Revolution. Similarly, in *Venus at Vulcan's Forge* (1757), François Boucher disempowers Venus, by eroticizing her, writes Rand, and by "working to block the perception that men cannot control women" (145-46). The forge is shoved into a corner while most of the canvas shows Venus frolicking with handmaidens; all are nude.

In "Nudity a la Grecque in 1799," Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby investigates the reception of David's *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (1799; Fig. 1). Post-revolution French women, it seems, quickly adapted the new clothing style of Neoclassicism to their own needs, slipping out of their cumbersome petticoats and into the loose, comfortable clothing featured in David's paintings. The women appear like fashion plates, and their costumes, down to Hersilia's antique sandals, were sold in Parisian shops. But when the fabrics became too transparent, men criticized the women for using sexual allure to gain power over them. History tells us, reminds the author, that men wrested the real or imagined agency from women by pressing them, with redoubled energy, back into the domestic realm of family and motherhood.

A surprising revelation in Carol Ockman's essay about Ingres's *Grande Odalisque* (1814) is that its patron was a woman. Queen Caroline Bonaparte Murat, Napoleon's youngest sister, commissioned it as a pendant to an

earlier reclining odalisque, now lost, purchased by her husband from Ingres. Could it be that the figure's frank eye contact with her audience, the denial of a frontal view of her torso, and the sensuousness of skin, silks, and jewels reflect prevalent female tastes in a period that has always been explained in heroic masculine terms? In works featuring prominent women by David, Antonio Canova, and other contemporary artists, Ockman demonstrates that such sensualized images are evidence of a new female taste, *anacreontisme*, characterized by a preference for "mythology at once graceful, tender and voluptuous" (195). On the other hand, Ockman writes, "[A]s soon as female agency acquired connotations of power and control—control over one's own body, power over a state—the imagery itself constituted a threat" (195).

In "Conduct Unbecoming, Daumier and 'Les Bas-Bleus,'" Janis Bergman-Carton states that the early nineteenth century saw increased agency of women in the visual and literary arts as well as in politics. Gender distinctions and class boundaries became more fluid. In the early 1830s books by women had a generally friendly reception, but by the end of the decade, the press was filled with attacks on women intellectuals, called "blue stockings" (*les bas-bleus*). Male artists such as Honoré Daumier published cartoons that caricatured and trivialized them. Bergman-Carton notes that when the king, Louis-Philippe, cracked down on journalism critical of his government, the press, seeking new subjects for scorn, turned on women. An interesting twist arose when editors had to defend themselves to their subscribers, many of them middle-class women, who objected to the ridicule because it was from their own ranks that many of the new authors emerged.

Norma Broude's "The Gendering of Impressionism" sheds new light on the drastic measures taken to align Impressionism with the tenets of modernism. Denigrating Impressionism for its focus on nature and feeling, both associated with the feminine principle, the Postimpressionists claimed to draw their ideas from the (superior and male-associated) mind. Symbolist writer/poets

like Albert Aurier and Charles Baudelaire spoke out against the painters of nature and the physical world, believing that science was the enemy of art (222). This view prevailed into the early decades of the twentieth century, but as Impressionist art began to appeal to an increasingly larger audience—and prices rose—art historians helped to re-gender Impressionism for the material (read: masculine) world. The style once disparaged as feminine was now seen as original and modern, reflective of a new age. What's more, the vehicle for this transformation was exactly what had held the Impressionists in contempt for many years: a mythic connection with science (225). Objecting to Clement Greenberg's later claim that Impressionism was a precursor to Abstract Expressionism, Broude writes that Impressionism looked back to Romanticism, not forward to abstraction—another bizarre twist to the reception of Impressionism.

Ruth Iskin opens a view beyond notions of gender in "Selling Seduction and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère." The much-discussed female figure, she writes, is first and foremost a salesperson of liquor standing before a crowd (in the mirror) of consumers, not only of alcohol but of a new, large-scale entertainment industry. Art historians have failed to notice how, with the rise of consumer culture, commercial enterprises used pretty young women to attract customers. Iskin also challenges Griselda Pollock's "spaces of femininity," that would confine the middle class-woman to the private sphere. For too long we have assumed men owned the gaze, but women, constituting a new consumer class, were aware of images of females.

In "Mary Cassatt: Modern Woman or the Cult of True Womanhood,"² Norma Broude reveals Cassatt (1844-1926) as a modern, ambitious woman whose choice to paint women and children may have been a deliberate, self-promoting move. Doting mothers with their children became a popular genre at a time when women were seeking personal satisfaction outside house and home. Broude enjoins us to see Cassatt's work neither in terms of the spaces of femininity (mothers and children) nor as

a glorification of stereotypes by "redefining them as radical feminist positions" (274). "Rather," she concludes, "we should look instead and with a sharper eye at the works of these nineteenth-century women for the traces of their self-conscious struggles and ambivalences and, most of all, for their patterns of resistance and complicity; for it is here, I believe, that important lessons for our own, not entirely different times can best be found" (274).

Marie Laurencin (1883-1956) said of her art that it was "thoroughly modern and completely feminine," neatly skewing the familiar binary, a theme upon which Bridget Elliott expands in "The 'Strength of the Weak' as Portrayed by Marie Laurencin." Like her contemporaries Coco Chanel, Colette, and Valentine Tessier, Laurencin seemed to appeal to an audience more in tune with popular mass culture than the more serious avant-garde art, and found ample space to maneuver within the gendered rhetoric of the early-twentieth century (279). Encouraged by her friend Apollinaire to incorporate aspects of the decorative arts, she also (perhaps somewhat subversively) painted women together, without the customary separation between artist and model. Elliot sees the hostility that greeted these subjects as male anxiety about female relationships that were clearly romantic, perhaps even erotic.

Like Broude and Ockman, Anna Chave privileges reception over production for a postmodern and postcolonial reading in "New Encounters with *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*: Gender, Race, and the Origins of Cubism." Why, Chave asks, has this painting (which entered the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in 1939) been so abundantly praised, even called the "paradigm of all modern art" (301)? The reason, she states, is that it was "a narrative of exclusion," a story about five prostitutes told by one heterosexual, white European male for an audience like himself (302). Chave finds that the manner in which Picasso painted the *Desmoiselles* (foreign-looking, powerful, with fierce African masks), reflects a strategy deployed to control and disempower colonized peoples that reflects "the fear of women and outsiders, including peoples

of color, usurping masculine roles and Western prerogatives, assuming agency" (311). In the early 1970s, as women were assuming a more aggressive stance, the art historian and curator William Rubin accorded Picasso's *Demoiselles* more sinister roles. He remarked that the masks express more than just the "barbaric" character of pure sexuality; their violence "alludes to Woman as Destroyer—vestiges of the Symbolist *femme fatale*" (314). Chave sees Picasso's use of sacred African masks as brazenly disrespectful, declaring their mimicry an act of appropriation and one of the most elusive and effective strategies employed by colonial powers.

In "The New Woman in Hannah Höch's Photomontages: Issues of Androgyny, Bisexuality and Oscillation," Maud Lavin focuses on Höch's (1889-1978) work from the point of view of female spectatorship. During the late 1920s, Höch used ambiguous, androgynous images, which often mocked men while offering multiple options for pleasure. In *Marlene* (1930), for example, a woman's bright red lips smile at the slavish fascination of two men ogling Marlene Dietrich's legendary legs mounted upside down atop a pedestal. Höch's work, Lavin concludes, "provides important evidence of the necessity—indeed the right—of women to shape their own new definition of utopia" and to create "the conditions that lead to empowerment" (339).

Julie Cole's "Claude Cahun, Marcel Moore, and the Collaborative Construction of a Lesbian Subjectivity" tells a similar story of female empowerment, reflecting the pair's efforts at dissolving the traditional subject/object binaries. Rather than situating their photographs within Surrealism, Cole investigates "how lesbian identity informed the appearance and meaning of the work Cahun produced with Moore (345)." For the most part, their photography was strictly private. Only one photo was published, Cahun's 1929 *Self-Portrait*, showing her head bald and distorted, denying any attempt at beautification or giving room for male fantasy. Cole points out that by photographing each other in androgynous clothing and untraditional settings, Cahun (1894-1954) and Moore (1892-1972) were formulating a nonhierarchical visual

language that was understood by an increasing female, largely lesbian, spectatorship. In their photomontages, meant for public viewing, they acknowledge each other through various means of reflections. Like Höch, Cahun and Moore used photography to create alternative worlds and identities.

In "Louise Bourgeois's *Femmes-Maisons*: Confronting Lacan"⁷³ Julie Nicoletta looks beyond Bourgeois's (b. 1911) bizarre family history and Freudian interpretations of her traumatized childhood to find other factors that may have influenced the artist (361). Although Bourgeois says she did not read Lacan's books until the 1970s, she was a student in France in the early 1930s when his ideas were being published and discussed (362). Lacan held that language (masculine) was a means to probe the unconscious (feminine), conceding that clear communication was difficult. Nicoletta writes that although both were concerned with gender issues, Lacan saw sexual difference "as grounded in a world in which the phallus is the transcendental signifier," dividing not only male from female but the real from the imaginary. Bourgeois's interest was "overcoming patriarchal dominance through the combination of the sexes and the undermining of language, Lacan's symbolic order" (363). In her *Femmes-Maisons* (1945-47), Bourgeois explores two major Lacanian themes: "sexual difference in terms of woman's role in society, and problems of communication," Nicoletta writes. These ideas made visible seem to say that women's minds don't count, only their sexual availability. By using art as her language, Bourgeois circumvents the symbolic order of patriarchal society.

In "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender and the Body in Helen Frankenthaler's *Painting*," Lisa Saltzman recounts the critical reception of Frankenthaler's (b. 1928) innovative technique. Seen as soft and feminine, with "the broad, bleeding-edged stain on raw linen" (375) described as a reference to menstrual processes, Frankenthaler's early stain paintings drew comparisons with Jackson Pollock's gestural drippings. His marks placed on the canvas were seen as deliberate, hers as accidental. However, when Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis began staining their canvases, the reception was

quite different: Louis's curtains of poured color stains were called "massive," "solid," "hard," and "sharp," said to demonstrate "control," "strength," "clarity," and "firmness." Writes Saltzman,

In their attribution of masculinity to canvases painted by male artists and femininity to those painted by female artists, critics asserted the fundamental primacy of sexual difference.... More specifically, in the deeply gendered and fundamentally conservative critical language with which postwar abstraction was received, it was the metaphoric invocation of the stain that was instrumentalized to serve as a particularly powerful signifier of gender, and through that, of difference (379).

Briefly discussing works of the next generation that included actual corporeal elements in their work, Saltzman notes a difference in the artists' attitude. Contemporary artists, she writes, "use the body, its pieces and its fluids, to explore the very instability of categories of gender and difference" (380).

Anna Chave in "Minimalism and Biography" reveals why so little was written about the lives of Minimalist artists apart from their work: partly "because of the intently impersonal aspects of their [art] practices," but also because of "critical paradigms entailing the diminishment or outright erasure of considerations of artistic subjectivity" in the 1960s (386). This proved to be a dilemma at a time when women were fighting for recognition as artists on the one hand and responding to Linda Nochlin's "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" on the other. Writes Chave, "Among a generation bent on separating itself from the heroic individualism of Abstract Expressionism, depersonalized visual modalities had come to the fore. For a woman to resist the example of Pop and Minimalism by overtly personalizing her art was to risk branding her work as retrogressive and, by the same stroke, to risk reinforcing that tacitly invidious division of labor that presupposes that women will assume 'expressive roles and orientations' while men adopt 'instrumental'

ones." (388). The Minimalism Chave "constructs" brings into focus how the lives of prominent artists (Robert Morris, Carl Andre) and those in their circles (Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Eva Hesse) impacted one another, the legacy of this art movement, and the voices of women (artists and critics, alike). To Foucault's 1960s-era question, "What does it matter who is speaking?," we need to respond that it matters crucially, as before the 1960s women had no voice at all. And, Chave, concludes, "as for who is *not* speaking: that matters even more" (398).

By scrutinizing critical responses to Judy Chicago's iconic work of the early feminist movement, in "The 'Sexual Politics' of the *Dinner Party*: A Critical Context," Amelia Jones "exposes 'the pitfalls of identity politics' that have plagued feminism increasingly since the 1970s" (9). After being widely disparaged as "kitsch" and "low art" by the (male) critical establishment, the still-popular *Dinner Party* has since become a polarizing topic among feminists, who have labeled Chicago's overt female imagery as an "essentializing reduction of women...to a biological feminine dubiously limited to wombs and vaginas" (9). Jones believes that the new critics show insufficient understanding of what these supposed "essentialist" artists such as Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, Faith Wilding, Mary Beth Edelson, Harmony Hammond, and Mira Schor were actually doing. "The use of centralized imagery and craft techniques in the 1970s feminist art was a *political act*, a defiance of the conventions," Jones writes. Female imagery "was a crucial step for feminism to mark gender as informative of cultural practice, to refuse the masculinist notion of 'universality' that guaranteed the privileging of male-invented forms" (420). She concludes that these "mother figures" of feminist art must be respected and commended "for the chances they took at a time when no one took women artists or women's issues seriously and, perhaps especially, for the mistakes they weren't afraid of making" (427).

In the last two essays in the book, we meet artists who open our eyes to a broader view of global feminism issues affecting female agency by sharing the cultural legacies of their birth countries.

Allison Arieff describes the work of China-born painter Hung Liu (b. 1948) as about memory, in "Cultural Collisions: Identity and History in the Work of Hung Liu."⁴ By incorporating old photographs of "mail order" prostitutes and brides in her paintings, Liu brings into focus the emotional and physical suffering of Chinese women under centuries of oppressive patriarchal rule. Her wish is to give something back to the women whose images she has appropriated—these mutilated objects of desire—who have been so objectified throughout history. She calls attention to many of the oppressive practices directed at them: their status as possessions and decorations, female infanticide, filial piety, chaste widowhood, namelessness (as in prostitution), lack of education. Several of Liu's most powerful works display unbound feet—considered a woman's most erotic attribute though never revealed—exposing the lifelong pain caused by such a brutal deformity. It is Liu's project to free these women from their three obediences (to father, husband, and son) and to give them life and control, "to empower them," to give them their own place in history (440-42).

John B. Ravenal discusses the art of an Iran-born photographer and video artist in "Shirin Neshat: Double Vision." After living in the U.S. for a decade, Neshat returned to Iran in 1991, and was shocked to see that everyone had gone through an "identity crisis," from being "Iranian-Persians to strict Muslims"

(448). The experience propelled her to create the black and white photographs of gun-toting, *chador*-clad women with Arabic writing across the visible body. She began to "explore the close connection among violence, politics, religion, and spirituality in extremist Islamic practice, as well as the contradictory status of women: subservient to men in most public spheres but compelled to participate fully in revolution and war" (447). Her trilogy of two-screen, black and white video installations, *Turbulent* (1998) *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000) explores "different facet[s] of fundamentalist Islam's social segregation of men and women" (449), contrasting scenes that highlight relationships not just between the sexes but between individuals and culture, and people and space. Ravenal writes that Neshat's radicalism and critique are subtle—often the women appear the more powerful, able to walk away while the men seem trapped; they are the instruments for change. As Neshat sees it: "Because the women are the ones who are under extreme pressure; they are repressed and therefore they are more likely to resist and ultimately to break free" (451). Neshat's optimism is encouraging.

Like their two earlier anthologies, Broude and Garrard's *Reclaiming Female Agency* is another "must-have" volume. The authors have assembled intelligent, well-researched and well-resourced essays that offer fresh and insightful approaches to significant questions about

female agency, and the result constitutes an important contribution to our re-evaluation and rediscovery of an evolving history. It is a history that reveals woman having exercised a much larger measure of agency—as patrons, artists, writers, viewers, and subjects—than had heretofore been acknowledged. That realization is exhilarating. At the same time I found it humbling to realize how much there is still to learn about familiar works of art when new questions are being asked. *Reclaiming Female Agency* is essential reading for all art history classes. These essays, as do those in the earlier anthologies, offer a feminist perspective to the study of many fields, from the Renaissance to the present, and they should be added to all reserve reading lists. They will make for lively discussions in any class. •

Ute Tellini is an independent art historian in New Jersey. She is now the book review editor for *WAJ*.

NOTES

1. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 101. Bohn does not comment on the sexualizing of Sirani's painting pointed out by Chadwick: a few carefully placed droplets of blood on a silken, naked thigh or her disheveled appearance and the crumpled bed covers.
2. This essay was first published in *WAJ*, 21:2 (Fall '00/Winter '01).
3. This essay was first published in *WAJ*, 13:2 (Fall '92/Winter '93).
4. This essay was first published in *WAJ*, 17:1 (Spring/Summer '96).

The Lost Tapestries of the City of Ladies: Christine de Pizan's Renaissance Legacy

by Susan Groag Bell

University of California Press, 2004

Reviewed by Laura Rinaldi Dufresne

Six pieces of tapestry collectively called the "Citie of Ladies" were among the "stuff delivered to the lady Elizabeth her grace, daughter to our late Sovereigne lorde king Henry the Eight and sister to our soveraigne Lorde that now is kinge Edwarde the sixte (6).

Author Susan Groag Bell's thirty-year search for the *City of Ladies* tapestries begins when she stumbles upon a reference in the 1547 inventory of King Henry VIII's effects held by his daughter Elizabeth I. In her endeavor to locate Elizabeth's tapestries, owned before she became queen, Bell discovers six additional sets of tapestries, of six to eight large panels each, depicting the same unusual *City of Ladies* subject, all owned or associated with some of the sixteenth-century's greatest regents and rulers, Margaret of Austria, Anne of Brittany, Louise of Savoy, and Mary of Guise and her daughter Mary Queen of Scots. Bell's

account of her hunt takes the reader along the exasperating, surprising, and often gratifying mission of the scholar-detective. Yet in the end, in spite of multiple references and leads, by the book's final chapter, she has found no actual *City of Ladies* tapestries extant. All, it seems, have vanished. "Every time I became discouraged about my quest," writes Bell, "I reminded myself that in order to bring the *City of Ladies* tapestries to life, I must bring their contemporary audience to life as well" (149). That audience is an extraordinary one, an audience of noblewomen who read Christine de Pizan's manuscripts and celebrated the heroines she

wrote about in the most luxurious art form of the Late Middle Ages: the tapestry. In the end, Bell's quest is not for naught, for she demonstrates that powerful women are drawn to and patronize works of art that resonate with their own experiences. As Bell states, "[E]ven though they are lost to us, the knowledge that these tapestries once existed offers us a glimpse into the power and purpose of reigning queens and women regents who also profited from Christine's peerless life and thought" (164).

The tapestries in question all depict scenes from one of the first books dedicated to women's history, *Le livre de la cite des dames* (The Book of the City of Ladies), written by Christine de Pizan in 1405. The connections among the noblewomen in the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries who were familiar with Christine's writings are complex, with labyrinthine relationships made through marriages, annulments, births, and widowhood (108).

Who is this influential author? Christine de Pizan (c. 1364–c. 1430) began writing courtly love poetry to support her family after the death of her husband when she was twenty-five. Although born in Italy, she was raised in the French royal court, where her father worked as physician and astrologer for King Charles V. Christine was given an extensive and unusual education, far beyond the norm for a girl of her class, thus instilling in her the inclination as well as the tools to work as a scribe, poet, and eventually author on all subjects of import during her time, from military matters to the education of young women. To support her three children, mother, and brothers, Christine writes that she had to change into a "man" to fight legal battles and take up the pen to earn her family bread (101). She is most admired today for her defense of women in many of her writings including *Le dit de la rose* (The Tale of the Rose, 1402), and *Le livre de trios vertus* (The Book of the Three Virtues, 1405). During her lifetime, her books were presented to and patronized by Queen Isabel of France, Jean of France, Jean duc de Berry, and John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy. In all she wrote nearly forty works of poetry



Fig. 1. Christine de Pizan (right) and Lady Reason survey the terrain as they begin construction of the City of Ladies. © Royal Library of Belgium, Brussels. MS 9235, f. 10v, c. 1460.

and prose, the last a hymn to Joan of Arc (*Ditie de Jeanne d' Arc*, 1429). Many of these manuscripts were beautifully illuminated with miniatures by artists of her own choosing, including a woman named Anastasia and other artists now known as The Epistre Master and The City of Ladies Master (154–55). In fact, Bell proposes the six miniatures accompanying Margaret of Austria's copy of the *Le livre de la cite des dames*, now in the Royal Library of Belgium, as the model for several of the *City of Ladies* tapestries (Fig. 1) (123). Christine de Pizan was, indeed, without parallel during her own time and, just as important, continued to be a model and inspiration for noblewomen for centuries to come through the continued popularity of her writings.

Copies of Christine's texts were carried from one European court to another by the women who commissioned them or their daughters who inherited them, as they married and moved to new homes. Her manuscripts are found in the library of Anne of France at the school for princes and princesses she established in 1483 at the Chateau of Amboise, in the Loire valley (75). Anne was the regent for her younger brother, the future King Charles VII. In addition to ruling France until he

came of age, she was responsible for his education and that of his future wife, Margaret of Austria, who was just three years of age at the time of her engagement and relocation to France. Anne brought the young Margaret, then known as "the little queen," to Amboise to be educated with her own daughter, Suzanne de Bourbon. Nearly ten years later, when the fourteen-year-old Anne of Brittany (who would replace Margaret of Austria as the next French queen) married Charles VIII, she, too, spent time at the Chateau of Amboise, which she later enlarged and rebuilt to her liking. Anne of Brittany loved art, hunting, and the work of Christine de Pizan. She owned manuscripts as well as a *City of Ladies* tapestry and was the patron of the first French editions of Christine's writings (102). Bell believes that Anne of France's court became the "breeding ground for a group of powerful, regal women"

(75), including Anne's niece, Louise of Savoy, who as the mother of King Francis I became an influential regent. Anne of France's own book, entitled *Les enseignements d' Anne de France á sa fille* (Anne de France's Teachings to Her Daughter), was inspired, most scholars believe, by Christine's *Le livre des trios vertus* (75). All of these women not only owned their own manuscripts of Christine's various works, but most are connected in some way with one of the lost *City of Ladies* tapestries.

The driving forces behind most of the queens and regents, Bell asserts, were political protection of the lands they owned or controlled and providing a male heir (106). Elizabeth I dealt with this issue by refusing to marry at all, although she entertained the idea of various suitors for political purposes. Ultimately she acknowledged her old enemy, Mary, Queen of Scots, by leaving her kingdom to Mary's son James (138). Others, such as Louise of Savoy and Margaret of Austria, after several marriages and the bearing or raising of the required male heir, refused to remarry and "enjoyed the political strength and personal power that widowhood allowed..." (117). It was as widows that these women blossomed

politically, as competent regents, diplomats and even peacemakers (117). Louise of Savoy “entered into clandestine negotiations with her sister-in-law and childhood companion Margaret of Austria,” now regent of Flanders and governor of the Netherlands, to meet at Cambrai and negotiate peace between Louise’s son, King Francis I, and Margaret’s nephew, Emperor Charles V, in what has since become known as “the Ladies Peace” or the Treaty of Cambrai (119). These two royal women, who had raised and acted as regents for the two monarchs now at war, were greeted by cheering crowds and “tapestry-bedecked” walls when they met to begin their month-long negotiations (120). During these and other initiatives the two women undertook during their lifetimes, they upheld Christine de Pizan’s “convictions about the desirability of peace and the potential contribution of women to the creation of a world of harmony rather than discord” (121).

Today’s audience for tapestries, laments Bell, is small, and surprisingly unappreciative (156) in contrast to earlier centuries, when they were a valued expression of the Renaissance aesthetic, especially in England, France, Belgium and the Netherlands (45). Generally made of wool interwoven with silk, and even silver and gold for a royal commission, tapestries were prestigious symbols of their owners’ wealth, class, and taste, and were often presented as lavish gifts to those in favor. In imitation, well-to-do merchants purchased humbler versions in pre-made sets to bring warmth, beauty, and status to their homes (45).

So necessary were tapestries to create the ambience of privilege necessitated by royalty that large sums of money were paid to transport them from one stately residence to another. In fact, a French inventory of May 1533 declares that one of the seven sets of tapestries sent to Marseilles to grace the wedding ceremony of Anne of Brittany’s grandson, Henry I, to Catherine de Medici, niece of Pope Clement VII, was the six-piece French tapestry of the *City of Ladies* (110). Tapestries were often draped over balconies and along walls to welcome kings, queens and dignitaries arriving on official matters of state.

The subject matter of most tapestries was broad, including Biblical events, apocryphal stories from the Golden Legend of Jacobus da Voragine, allegorical romances and Homeric tales of Hercules, Amazons, and the Trojan War (53). In Flanders tapestries were designed by the most important artists of the day, including Jan van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden, Dirk Bouts, and Hans Memling, and weaving these copious collections took years. The great centers of tapestry production during this period were located in northern France and Belgium (then known as the Flemish Netherlands). The name of the French city of Arras became synonymous with tapestry, and a term for tapestry itself (51). With time Bruges, Middleburg, Lille, Tournai, and Brussels replaced Arras as centers of tapestry production. Bell also discusses the role women played in this industry, discovering the names of two women weavers in the guild records of Arras: Anne de Bommy and Demoiselle de Caucourt, who were active between 1423 and 1467 (69-70). Nuns in convents produced tapestries, although most women worked anonymously—they were the wives and daughters of members of the male-only weavers’ guilds (70). As in her earlier writings on the role of women as book owners and ambassadors of culture, Bell believes that women also played a role in the dispersal of tapestries, through their patronage and by bequeathing their collections to their children, who carried them to other lands through marriage. This was certainly true for Queen Isabella of Castile and Margaret of Austria, as their inventories attest. Elizabeth inherited her *City of Ladies* tapestries from her father, Henry VIII, although they may have been commissioned for her (69).

Why were these noblewomen drawn to the *City of Ladies* as a subject for their tapestries? Perhaps because Christine de Pizan discusses women’s contributions to history, using three allegorical figures, Reason, Rectitude and Justice, and nearly two hundred women. Writes Bell, “[I]f I were asked to name one characteristic that these exemplary women have in common, I would suggest self-sufficiency. They are strong and independent and in their valor and their ideas they are far from traditional and often extremely

original...” (30-31). This description of Christine’s heroines applies to the owners of her books and tapestries as well. Christians and pagans, historical and mythological figures, scholars and warriors, saints and lovers, the women Christine discusses include Ceres, Artemis, Cornificia, Semeramis, Penthesilea, Queen Fredegunda, and the Virgin Mary herself. The visibility of such inspirational heroines on the palace walls of their patrons not only honored great women of the past, but also bolstered the confidence of those contemporary women wielding power in a male world. This was just as Christine planned, for as she writes at the end of *Le livre de la cite des dames*, she hoped that future generations of “valiant ladies and women of authority” would remember both the deeds of these heroic women as well as the humanist ideals they represent, as found in her writing (103).

Why did the manuscripts of Christine de Pizan fall out of favor? Bell believes that “in the context of a society preoccupied with the careful development of the early modern gentleman, an author who was also a woman appears to have been something of an embarrassment” (152). In 1526, when Richard Pynson reprinted Caxton’s 1478 *Moral Proverbes of Chrystine*, he removed her name from the title and omitted the final lines praising the “auctoresse,” even going so far as to attribute the work to Geoffrey Chaucer (152). As to why the tapestries might have been taken from the walls and stored away only to be lost or even destroyed, Bell explains that their implications would have been disturbing to some. Writes Bell,

[T]he message delivered by these huge woven panels depicting reigning queens, women philosophers, women builders of cities, female warriors, and other praiseworthy and courageous women was not merely a construct of a world created by women but a challenge to the masculine impulse toward patriarchy (158).

For anyone who revels in exploring art in context, Bell’s book is an astonishing success. Apart from conveying the importance of tapestry in the Renaissance, the author also explains

what these works of art may have meant to the remarkable women who owned them. Most important, she leads the reader lovingly through the lives of these exceptional women, which are every bit as astonishing and remarkable as those Christine recounts in *Le livre de la cite des dames*. Susan Groag Bell demonstrates in

this innovative study that meticulous scholarship need not make for tedious reading. In fact, as she proves, it can be as exciting as a good mystery novel. Who knows, perhaps after reading this book, someone might find these lost tapestries moldering in their attic. •

Laura Rinaldi Dufresne is Professor and Coordinator of Art History at Winthrop University in South Carolina. She is currently working on a study of Portuguese tile murals.

Intrepid Women: Victorian Artists Travel

edited by Jordana Pomeroy
Ashgate, 2005

Reviewed by Alicia Craig Faxon

This book introduces the reader to a variety of Victorian women travelers who were artists and writers and, perhaps more significantly, shows how their accounts and exploits changed society's views of women's abilities and acceptable activities. By stressing a foreign milieu over a confined domestic existence, these remarkable women challenged prevailing ideas of the proper role of women and their capacities. As intrepid explorers of hitherto unknown areas of the globe, they overturned stereotypes of timidity, domesticity, and limited opportunities for their sex. The worlds they conquered were as much local prejudices as foreign fields. Watercolors heretofore praised as genteel accomplishments were transformed into records of perilous voyages and exotic locales. Through their travels, these women helped liberate those who stayed at home by developing new types of femininity.

The volume editor, Jordana Pomeroy, a curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D. C., began the project as an exhibition, with works by professional artists who exhibited at the Royal Academy and other prestigious venues shown alongside more personal sketches, illustrations, prints, and paintings by amateurs, documenting their experiences. The book's eight essays were authored by scholars from a variety of disciplines, including art history, English, humanities, and women's studies. One of the most important points

made in both the book and the exhibition is the impact of these traveling artists on the Victorian view of women as home-loving, obedient, and unadventurous. They created a redefinition of femininity as "active, strong, working, and self-determined" (3), writes essayist Susan Casteras. Victorian women artists abroad achieved more freedom and more scope for their activities than they had in their native England.

The women discussed are nineteenth-century Englishwomen, mostly of the upper middle class. Some journeyed to far places because of their husbands' jobs, others, such as Barbara Smith Bodichon or Marianne North, were independently wealthy and used their own means to fund their travels and direct their own explorations. By chronicling their trips in artworks and writings, all left an enviable legacy.

As Casteras points out in the first essay, entitled "With palettes, pencils and parasols: Victorian women artists traverse the Empire," the art that was considered a genteel accomplishment for women became the means by which they described their experiences. It also became a means of empowerment, as many of their artworks later became travel-book plates or illustrations for botanical works. In her essay, "Borders and boundaries, perspectives and place," Maria H. Frawley reports that "Venturing beyond borders at once geographical and ideological, Victorian women travelers yoked the powers of verbal and visual representation to display the wonders of their journeys" (36). The women's destinations make an impressive list: among them Africa, Canada, South America, the Holy Land,



Fig. 1. Frances Anne Hopkins, *Shooting the Rapids* (c. 1879) oil on canvas, Courtesy: Library and National Archives Canada/Anne Hopkins fonds/Acc. no. 1989-401-2/C-002774.

the Middle East, Ceylon, China, Japan, Australia, and of course, Italy. Travel functioned as a road to independence and an antidote to contemporary status quo opinions of women and their abilities. In her oil painting *Shooting the Rapids* (c. 1879; Fig. 1), Frances Anne Hopkins included herself and her husband among the middle row of passengers. Likewise, no viewers of Lady Charlotte Canning's watercolor views of Alexandria (1855), or the more than seventy illustrations in Amelia Edward's *A Thousand Miles of the Nile* (1889) could fail to recognize women as active and daring adventurers, defying societal expectations (34-35).

Pomeroy's essay, "'We Got Upon Our Elephant and went after Subjects': capturing the world in watercolor," illustrates the importance of watercolor for recording sites as well as flora and fauna. Unlike the more cumbersome equipment of oil painting or early photography, ready-made cakes of watercolor and lightweight paper sketching books made this medium both portable and accessible for women. Using watercolor, they documented new

species of birds, fish, animals, and botanical plants. These studies opened scientific vistas otherwise not available within the masculine domain of professional scientists and scientific societies. As Ann B. Shteir relates in "Women and the Natural World: expanding horizons at home," natural history was seen as an appropriate subject for women, and botany became a popular area in which to study and make drawings and write accounts for women's magazines. Women like Sara Bowditch, widowed in 1825, supported herself by drawing natural history illustrations, hand painting 300 plates for her *Fresh Water Fishes of Great Britain*, published between 1828 and 1838.

In "Shifting Continents, Shifting Species: Louisa Ann Meredith at 'home' in Tasmania," Barbara T. Gates details the career of this painter and writer. Living in New South Wales from 1839 to 1844, Meredith wrote five books about her observations and experiences there, correcting previous works on the subject by authors who had not studied the flora and fauna firsthand. The travels of another visitor to New South Wales are recounted by Caroline Johnson in "Emma Macpherson in the 'blacks' camp' and other Australian interludes." Macpherson's book, published anonymously in London by J. Hope

in 1860 and illustrated with her lithographic plates, describes her experiences as a squatter's wife and is unusual in its interest in the aboriginal natives she encountered as a colonist.

One of the most interesting essays in the book is Jeff Rosen's "Cameron's colonized eden: picturesque politics at the edge of the Empire," in which he presents a less familiar aspect of Julia Margaret Cameron's life and career. Via her photographs made in Ceylon after she left England in 1875, we encounter the artist as one of the spreaders of the British Empire and its view of native cultures, which were often seen as primitive and in need of civilizing. Her photographs of the native people never seem to reach her earlier imaginative portrayals of famous men and women, Arthurian legends, or religious and literary subjects.

It is a pity that there are no color plates, as it is obvious that many of the original works are in color, and the thirty-two black and white illustrations give little indication of their true appearance. However, *Intrepid Women* presents many new women artists through their explorations and achievements, and for this we must be thankful. Above all it shows how these women defied the conventions of Victorian womanhood, braved new

areas of the Empire and beyond, and contributed significantly to scientific knowledge as well as portraying new worlds to those who remained at home.

Intrepid Women is highly recommended as a new source of material for nineteenth-century art, Victorian studies, women artists, women's studies, British history and social and cultural history. It gives us insight into the surprising activities of Victorian women artists and writers and their contributions to the culture of their time. It also presents possibilities for new roles for women and details the ways in which private activities such as diary writing and sketching became public outlets as their writings and watercolors were published in travel and natural history books with lithographic plates. Although only a few women, including the battle painter Lady Elizabeth Thompson Butler and Julia Margaret Cameron, became well known for their art, many contributed vitally to the visual culture of Victorian England and to a new view of women's talents, stamina, and accomplishments. •

Alicia Craig Faxon, Professor of Art History (Emerita) at Simmons College, is co-author of *Self-Portraits by Women Painters* (2000).

Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt

by Sally Webster

University of Illinois Press, 2004

Reviewed by Caroline I. Harris

I once taught a course titled Impressionist Women: Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt. I chose the topic because I have long been an admirer of Cassatt's (1844-1926) canvases and, in particular, her prints. Her drafting skill was superb and her compositions are carefully wrought, like complex puzzles painstakingly assembled. She was so gifted, her friend and mentor Edgar Degas famously



Fig. 1. Mary Cassatt, *Modern Woman* (1892-93), oil on canvas, 15' x 64 1/2'. (From Maud Howe Elliott, *Art and Handicraft in the Woman's Building of the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893*).

commented, "I am not willing to admit that a woman can draw that well." As always in studying the career of an artist as experimental as Cassatt, I discovered some surprises in her biography. I was amazed to learn that she had created a mural on the theme of "Modern Woman" (Fig. 1) for the Woman's Building of the

1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The mural is now lost and Cassatt never created another, and I did not include it in the course for lack of time. But I was intrigued and, thus, delighted when asked to review *Eve's Daughter/Modern Woman: A Mural by Mary Cassatt*.

Author Sally Webster provides an

excellent, brief overview of Cassatt's career as well as of the creation and iconography of the mural, placing it in the context of the history of the women's movement in the United States, and the Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition. Indeed, the two most successful discussions are found in chapter 2 on "Modern Woman and the World's Columbian Exposition" and the section in chapter 3 on the mural's central panel, which she relates to late-nineteenth-century debates about the role of Eve. My one negative comment would be that the book's strength is also its weakness. At 139 pages of text, it is necessarily a gloss, and the reader in search of in-depth discussions on all points may be frustrated at times. For example, I would have liked a stronger argument for the connections between Cassatt's project and the work of the Nabis, a group of artists centered in Paris during the late 1880s and 1890s.

Mary Cassatt's was one of two large murals created for the tympana of the Hall of Honor in the Woman's Building. She broke the composition down into three panels: *Young Girls Pursuing Fame* on the viewer's left, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science* in the center, and *Arts, Music, and Dancing* on the right. Mary Fairchild MacMonnies was responsible for the other tympanum mural, entitled *Primitive Woman*. Beginning with an overview of the project and a short introduction to Cassatt's career, Webster manages to cover the salient points in an interesting way and at a brisk pace. She then turns to a discussion of the Woman's Building and the Columbian Exposition,¹ providing a useful and well-researched outline covering the history of the fair, the decision to create a Board of Lady Managers and the Woman's Building, and the genesis of the Cassatt commission.

The politics of the women's movement in the late-nineteenth century are as fascinating as they are Byzantine. Webster gracefully teases out the tensions between the suffragists, who hoped to use the fair as an opportunity to promote their cause, and the social reformers and women professionals who stressed issues related to women's welfare at home and at work. The reformers and professionals dominat-

ed at the Chicago Exposition. Webster also gives an excellent summary of the contributions of Bertha Honoré Palmer, the strong-minded socialite elected as the president of the Board of Lady Managers and the person most directly responsible for the success of the Woman's Building. Generously illustrated with photographs of the fair buildings, chapter 2 includes images of the interior and exterior, as well as the plans for the ground floor and gallery of the Woman's Building. The author's careful walk-through of the plan is invaluable. She gives the reader a clear sense of the exhibits and the decoration of the space, allowing for a greater understanding of the original site and reception of Cassatt's work.

Cassatt was not widely known in the United States in 1892, and her decision to accept the commission was made in part to help promote her work in her home country. The challenge also intrigued her. In a letter to her friend, the collector Louisine Havemeyer, she wrote: "When the Committee offered it to me to do, at first I was horrified, but gradually I began to think it would be great fun to do something I had never done before..." (64). That is one of the most intriguing aspects of the commission. Cassatt had never painted a mural; moreover, she was not a painter of symbolic subjects or allegories. She was, like her Impressionist colleagues, a painter of modern life, capturing in particular the domestic realm of family and friends in which she lived and worked. The commission afforded her the opportunity to experiment with new techniques and broader themes.

Webster argues that the "heart of Cassatt's allegorical *Modern Woman* is its central panel, *Young Women Plucking the Fruits of Knowledge or Science*" (73). The scene depicts several groups of women harvesting apples in a large orchard. Typical of her practice, Cassatt worked from life, and the author notes that the orchard is based on the one behind her summerhouse at Bachivillers (124). The central group, the core of the entire composition, includes a woman on a ladder handing a girl a piece of fruit—an obvious reference to the passing of knowledge from one generation to another. A third woman has one hand on an apple and the other on the ladder,

while a fourth holds a basket of apples and looks off to her left. This section is the only area of the composition for which a color print survives, which is reproduced on the book jacket. (All the illustrations in the book are black and white.) A contemporary writer for *The Critic*, Lucy Monroe, described the mural as dominated by a "bright grass-green" (121)² and the scanty extant evidence supports her analysis.

Any Western image of women in a garden picking apples resonates with the long history of representations of the fall of man in the Christian tradition. Such works illustrate the serpent's temptation of Eve with the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve in turn convinced Adam to taste of the fruit, and in punishment God expelled them from paradise. Webster points out that the iconography in this panel was unique. Cassatt subverts the traditional story, reinterpreting the role of woman. No men appear in her idyllic garden, and the knowledge passed from one person to another is not forbidden or given in shame, but rather is a generous sharing among equals. Cassatt's reinterpretation, Webster argues, can be understood in relation to discussions of the role of Eve taking place within the debate about women's education and role in society in the late-nineteenth century. Some commentators, such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, set aside the traditional interpretation of Eve as a subordinate temptress who facilitates the fall of man, recasting her as a powerful individual who made possible the intellectual development of all humankind. No evidence survives to indicate that Cassatt knew Stanton's writings. Rather, it appears to be an interesting parallel between Cassatt's mural and a text by a contemporary American feminist. An excerpt from Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, included in the book, is compelling:

In this prolonged interview [between Eve and the serpent], the unprejudiced reader must be impressed with the courage, the dignity, and the lofty ambition of the woman. The tempter [the serpent] evidently had a profound human nature, and saw at a glance the high character of the person he

met by chance in his walks in the garden. He did not try to tempt her from the path of duty by brilliant jewels, rich dresses, worldly luxuries or pleasure, but with the promise of knowledge, with the wisdom of Gods (77).³

Webster attempts to connect Cassatt's choices in the mural with other debates surrounding contemporary women's issues. For example, she contends that all the figures in the mural wear the uncorseted day dresses typical of French women of the time, reflecting the health concerns of the women's dress reform movement. In the mural's left panel, young girls unabashedly race after fame—a small nude, female figure that flies away from them—refusing to be limited to a domestic or acquiescent position. Webster asserts that these figures literally *run* after fame, possibly responding to new attitudes about women and exercise. Whether Cassatt was aware of such reform movements and consciously incorporated references to them into the design is the critical issue, which Webster fails to address.

In discussing the mural's design, Webster makes an admirable number of associations with other works, from Japanese prints to Cassatt's Impressionist contemporaries, Berthe Morisot (1841-95) and Camille Pissarro. As with other areas of the book, she paints with a broad brush, and some arguments beg for more detailed evidence. Certain connections are immediately obvious such as those to Puvis de Chavannes's murals or Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera*. Webster also succinctly situates Cassatt's mural in the discussion of the role of the decorative in painting taking place in Paris in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. However, she barely articulates the relationship between Cassatt's mural and the work of the Nabis—the new generation of avant-garde artists who were working at the very same moment, despite her claim that *Modern Woman* reflected their “decorative aesthetic...principally the artists Bonnard, Vuillard, and Maurice Denis” (123-24). Illustrations of salient Nabis works and a few paragraphs explaining where Cassatt might have seen them, as well as a more carefully drawn argument about the for-

mal connections between their work and hers, would help support her case.

As Webster discusses in chapter 4, critics of the time were hardly uniform in their praise of Cassatt's mural. Many disliked the color, which they considered not in keeping with the Woman's Building interior. Some thought the composition lacked unity because, even though the panels share the same horizon line, the individual scenes take place in different settings. Webster does not dismiss such criticism, however, she does not address the peculiarities of the mural, some of which contemporary critics discussed. For example, Florence Fenwick Miller in her 1893 article for the *Art Journal* singled out *Young Women Chasing Fame* for derision. I include this quote at length because, while I cannot agree with Miller's description of Cassatt as a “joker,” she does clearly identify some of the problems with the first panel. Even in a bad, black and white reproduction, the nude flying figure, foreshortened so that her derriere juts out at the viewer, seems oddly out of place, hurtling through the sky. The girls below press forward, almost leaping off the ground in their yearning. They seem more desperate than liberated. One of the girls looks back at the geese anxiously, as if to assess the position of a pursuer. The vignette of the geese with their wings lifted as if running after the fleeing girls does add a hint of unintentional parody:

...But the third panel is the most curious. There we see an objectionable female nude figure, her back cut off on one side in a most ludicrous manner by a sleek thick tail of black hair, reaching to the waist; her hands are stuck out, grasping what at first appears to be the end of one cord of a giant stride, and as the young woman is soaring in the sky without wings, and her legs are “flying all abroad,” she bears the appearance of being engaged in that gymnastic exercise. Further consideration, however, leads to the conclusion that this handle is the flag-end of a trumpet, and this appears to be the intention, for far below her are three hideous

girls, running and vainly reaching up after the flying phantom, and one gathers the idea that this is “Modern Woman” in the useless pursuit of fame. To complete the sarcasm, the artist has placed behind the stretching, running girls four cackling geese stretching their necks and running too, and distinctly expressing derision. Miss Cassatt is evidently a joker, and has been “taking a rise” out of the enthusiastic ladies who have employed her (123).⁴

By presenting a series of concise and well-researched discussions, Webster provides a context for this unique, public commission in Cassatt's oeuvre. Her book would be a useful resource for art historians and an interesting read for a general audience, perhaps encouraging further study of this important experiment by a major late-nineteenth-century painter and printmaker. Of course, Cassatt's mural is lost and, as Webster herself points out, it is a “fool's errand” to try to assess the artist's achievement, particularly from the point of view of aesthetics. Yet, I am not as convinced as Webster seems to be that the project was a success. Webster compares the work with four paintings and one print Cassatt created at about the same time as the mural and which have obvious connections to it. Each is a tour de force of compositional harmony and exquisite drawing. *Baby Reaching for an Apple* (1893), for example, depicts a young woman holding in her arms a baby who twists toward the viewer in an extremely complex pose and extends his hand to reach for an apple. In comparison to such a masterpiece, the mural program seems to be an amalgam of vignettes that do not quite cohere, lacking that taut sense of balance, order, and visual rigor that I associate with Cassatt. •

Caroline I. (Cassells) Harris is Curator of Education and Academic Programming at Princeton University Art Museum. Previously, she was with the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and taught art history at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia, and the University of Virginia.

NOTES

1. As Webster writes, more can be found about the Woman's Building in the "highly detailed," 600-page book by Jeanne Madeleine Weimann, *The Fair Women: The Story of the Woman's Building, World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago, 1893* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981).
2. Lucy Monroe, "Chicago Letter," *The Critic* (April 15, 1893), 240.
3. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the Revising Committee. *The Woman's Bible* (1898; repr., Seattle: Coalition Task Force on Women and Religion, 1974), 24-25.
4. Florence Fenwick Miller, "Art in the Woman's Section of the Chicago Exhibition." *Art Journal* (London: Fair Supplement, 1893), xiv.

Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent

edited by Holly Pyne Connor
Rutgers University Press, 2006

Reviewed by Donna Gustafson

The Newark Museum, founded in 1909, has a reputation for scholarly exhibitions and is known for its collection of American art. *Off the Pedestal: New Women in the Art of Homer, Chase, and Sargent*, the "first museum exhibition to identify and analyze images of the late nineteenth century emancipated women" (xi), is heir to both those traditions.¹ Organized by the museum's Curator of Nineteenth-Century American Art, Holly Pyne Connor, and Mary Kate O'Hare, Assistant Curator of American Art, the beautifully installed exhibition succeeded admirably in narrating through images the story of the New Woman who emerged at the end of the nineteenth-century. While including many examples of works by women, the focus of the exhibition and (with the exception of one essay) the accompanying catalogue is the image of the New Woman as seen through the lens of three established male artists.

The three main essays of the catalogue reflect the careful research that was evident in the exhibition. Among the seventy-eight illustrations, many in color, are works of art not in the exhibition. Connor's general essay, "Not at Home: The Nineteenth-Century New Woman," describes the particular slant of this investigation: "[C]haracterized as intelligent, professional and physically active, these 'new women' appear repeatedly in the

works of Winslow Homer, William Merritt Chase, John Singer Sargent and their contemporaries. These innovative artists were fascinated by those who mirrored the dramatic changes in women's lives..." (1). In her essay, "The Manly New Woman," Mary W. Blanchard focuses on the woman who wore pants and "delighted in upsetting the status quo by smoking and bossing her husband" (92). Sarah Burns's essay, "Winslow Homer's Ambiguously New Women," examines that artist's work of the 1870s, when he was exploring the character of the New Woman in American society, showing her at play, shopping, and—as a schoolteacher—at work.

As Connor notes, the New Woman has been discussed in previous art historical contexts; however, this study is the first to trace her origins to the 1860s. Connor's essay is organized in chronological sections, beginning with the post-Civil War period and the works of Homer, Lilly Martin Spencer, and others. She argues that the Civil War created the possibility for shifts of power in the gender balance, stating that as casualties mounted on both sides, women were encouraged to take up the slack, filling roles that had been previously the exclusive realm of men. The uneasy acceptance of this is indicated by Spencer's painting *The War Spirit at Home: Celebrating the Victory at Vicksburg* (1866), showing half-dressed, rambunctious children parading through the dining room while their mother (a self-portrait) holds a baby precariously on her lap while attempting to read the newspaper. As Connor notes, this is an ambivalent representation of the changes in the gendered power structure. In this painting by a woman artist, the mother is head of the house, but the house is

clearly in disorder (9). Subsequent sections of her essay focus on "Unchaperoned Women in Public," "Thinking Women," and "Professional Women" (including artists and writers). Art was a popular career choice for women, and Connor is careful to describe both the opportunities available and the obstacles to their success. For example, as she details, women made up 50 percent of the working artists in America, and while they were able to attend art schools, as illustrated by Alice Barber Stephens's *The Women's Life Class* (c. 1879), and compete with male artists for prizes and commissions, very few actually attained membership in prestigious societies like the National Academy of Design (23).

Many saw women entering public life as a dangerous unsettling of the accepted social order, and social critics warned that manly women would create feminine men. Connor draws on popular culture to provide images such as Samuel Ehrhardt's "The Emancipated Woman," an 1895 illustration from *Puck*, showing a husband bottle-feeding the baby while his wife complains that he hasn't mended her suspenders (34). After a quick sally through the subject of the athletic woman, including a discussion of the bicycle as an icon of modernity and, in feminine hands, a sign of independence, we meet the full-blown New Woman, who, by the 1890s had "emerged as a highly visible and recognizable image of modernity and liberation in art, literature, and the popular press" (39). Connor describes Sargent's *Portrait of Miss Carey Thomas, President of Bryn Mawr College* (1894-1922) (1899) as his "most austere and serious portrait of a New Woman" (46).

Connor's discussion ranges over imagery in the fine arts, illustrations in popular journals, and fiction of the period. In her section on "Unchaperoned Women in Public," she discusses Chase's *Park Bench (An Idle Hour in the Park—Central Park)* (c. 1890; Central Park) (c. 1890), showing a woman sitting alone on a bench gazing directly at the viewer, thus defying "conventional behavior in order to enjoy the outdoors without male protection" (17). On the "Thinking Woman," Connor adeptly navigates the many conflicting late-nineteenth-century opinions as to the strengths—but mostly weaknesses—of the female sex, from various medical and scientific perspectives. For example, Connor notes that male doctors cautioned that serious intellectual pursuits would ruin a girl's health, and so the image of a young woman reading, studying, or attending college had wider societal implications. She cites Dr. Edward H. Clarke's warning "that studying for more than a few hours a day could be dangerous" to females (19). Images in the popular media of "liberated" women on campuses such as Mount Holyoke, Vassar, and Wellesley (founded in 1837, 1865, and 1870, respectively)—often shown with bicycles and books and wearing tailored shirtwaists—would have been seen in the context of this debate. Women artists were more likely to produce unconventional portrayals of women reading, as seen for example in Mary Cassatt's portrait of her mother, *Reading "Le Figaro,"* (c. 1877-78), which Connor compares to Eastman Johnson's *Interesting News* (1872). Cassatt's closely cropped image "underscores the total absorption of the sitter" (19), while "Johnson's thinking woman appears at home in a cozy interior reminiscent of seventeenth-century Dutch genre painting" (20).

An issue not fully addressed by Connor is the question of class, and how the expectations of dress and comportment differed depending on an individual's situation. Chase and Sargent, for example, focused on the wealthiest members of society, and while these women had to observe strict decorum, they had a certain degree of freedom within the privacy of their own



Fig. 1. Alice Austen, *Trude and I Masked, Short Skirts*, 11 pm, August 6th, 1891, photograph. Staten Island Historical Association. Courtesy Newark Museum.

homes. (Blanchard reveals women's empowerment in private in her discussions of the photographers Alice Austen and Frances Benjamin Johnston.) Because portraiture is a partnership between artist and sitter, it would have been interesting to have more analysis of how the public and the private intersected in these portraits. A tantalizing detail on Sargent's process in the painting of his memorable portrait of Edith Stokes is suggestive of this relationship. Connor notes that Sargent originally planned to paint Mrs. Stokes in a formal gown but decided that the more casual shirtwaist and skirt would better capture her "vivacious and energetic nature" (46). Stokes wrote in her memoirs, "We thought it wise to submit to his whim, although we had, even then, some apprehension lest our friends at home...might not altogether approve" (46). Connor includes a discussion of Henry James and Edith Wharton, whose fictional accounts of the New Woman gave Connor important insights for her visual analysis. She notes that characters who defied social conventions, like James's Daisy Miller or Wharton's Lily Bart, suffered death or society's censure in the end, leaving little doubt that, however bold the New Woman might pretend to be, society set strict limits to her independence.

Sarah Burns, the Ruth N. Halls Professor of Fine Arts at Indiana University, Bloomington, rightly argues for Homer's focus on the subject of the New Woman in post-Civil War America as more than a personal interest. As she notes, Homer exhibited three large paintings of American women out-of-doors at the National Academy of Design in 1870: *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts*; *The Bridle Path, White Mountains*; and *Manners and Customs of the Seaside* (lost). Burns's research into fashion and the larger contexts Homer painted—outdoor entertainments, schoolhouses, the Adirondacks—provide interesting comparisons, which she applies to questions she sets out in her opening paragraphs, such as, "Who are these women Homer depicted, riding swimming, skating, shopping, teaching, reading, hiking? What did Homer think of them, and why did he choose to represent those particular pursuits?" (54). Her method yields results, and she concludes, for example, in her discussion of *The Bridle Path*, that unlike many other women depicted in popular journals, Homer's equestrienne is not a New Woman. She is, writes Burns, "explicitly, not a Girl of the Period...symbolizing the worst tendencies of modern American girlhood..." (61). Rather, as Burns notes after a discussion of several other

paintings by Homer, including *Croquet Scene* (1866; *Croquet Scene* (1866)), she is neither old-fashioned and passive nor threatening and masculine, but moderately modern. Burns contrasts Homer's representations of girls out-of-doors with other contemporary examples. Her astuteness in noting Homer's penchant to present two types of girls—distinguished by differences in fashion, posture, and attitude—in the same painting is evidence of her careful and sensitive readings; and her discussion of the competing definitions of femininity help clarify both Homer's subjects and the broader topic of the New Woman. As Burns neatly explains, “where the True Woman was delicate, passive, subservient, and self-sacrificing, the ‘Real Woman’ was healthy, vigorous, and self-possessed” (73). The model of the Real Woman (Burns credits the historian Frances Cogan for identifying her attributes) had elements of feminism; but as both Burns and Cogan are quick to point out, these were safely subsumed within the larger framework of traditional femininity. Homer's ideal subject, thus, is not threatening, but in Burns's view matches the middle-of-the-road modernity of Cogan's “Real Woman.” Even in his later paintings of schoolmistresses and hikers on the wilderness trails of the Adirondacks, Homer remains ambivalent. Burns reads them as “clearly out of place”; they are “modern, independent, self-guided females” (89), evidence of the artist's admiration, if not affection.

Mary Blanchard draws distinctions between the rebellious suffragette who remained within the bounds of society and the woman who wore pants, both literally and figuratively. In the exhibition, contemporary costumes were included to reinforce the point that women's clothing was heavy, expensive, and confining—restricting movement and a woman's ability to make her way in the world, both financially and physically. In all three essays a woman's choice of dress became a signifier of her political point of view vis-à-vis the gender question. Blanchard focuses on women in pants and discusses photographs including farm women at work (98), Calamity Jane (99), Anna Boles of the Oneida Community (100), and,

most surprisingly, women like Sarah Rosetta Wakeman, alias Pvt. Lyons Wakeman, 153rd Regiment, New York State Volunteers (103), who enlisted to fight in the Civil War. Blanchard, an associate fellow of the Rutgers Center for Historical Analysis, draws from the popular media, including illustrations from *Life* and *Puck* magazines, *Harper's Weekly*, and the *National Police Gazette*, a men's magazine, found in barbershops, which treated women in pants “with humor and awe” (111). Her essay details a diverse spectrum of activity among late-nineteenth-century women, including participation in a variety of sports, as exemplified by Thomas Edison's 1902 film of the “Gordon Sisters Boxing.” Besides giving evidence of the New Woman in action, this could serve to remind us of the importance of new technologies in the evolution of popular culture.

Blanchard features the photographers Alice Austen and Frances Benjamin Johnston as part of a network of women artists who, in the privacy of their homes and studios, broke the gender identity barriers to create transgressive, highly independent, new images. (Many contemporary viewers would certainly have found such images perverse.) Their photographs of women dressed and made up to look like men suggest the importance of performance as a strategy to circumvent society's constraints. Johnston used masculine attributes and body language to declare her freedom from Victorian stereotypes. In her *Self-Portrait* (c. 1896), she sits in profile, ankle crossed over knee, holding a cigarette and a beer stein. Austen, however, “dared to examine a lesbian sensibility in her art” (122) and lived openly as a lesbian with her longtime companion, Gertrude Tate. Her photograph, *Trude and I Masked, Short Skirts, 11 pm, August 6th, 1891* (Fig. 1), is rightly interpreted by Blanchard as a provocative image of lesbian love. Throughout her essay, Blanchard unravels some complicated strains between the public and private spheres: for example, revealing many women wore pants at home but not in public; offering proof for acceptance of lesbians and evidence of long-term relationships among lesbian partners; and exploring, as in the case of the *National Police Gazette*, the sexual

titillation of the manly woman and how different strata of society reacted to physical women. She writes, “The story of the manly woman in Victorian society began before the Civil War. It is a narrative that blends both the private and public worlds and examines the elusive boundaries between the male and the female spheres” (94).

While there are many differences between the exhibition and the book—works present or discussed only in one or the other—generally speaking, the exhibition followed the organizational structure of Connor's essay. The opening section, “The Gilded Cage,” presented the nineteenth-century ideal of femininity in its two guises: virgin and self-sacrificing mother. Following the post-Civil War period, a section titled “Women Outdoors” featured images of (mostly) women participating in cycling, skating, and hiking, and sitting (unescorted) in public parks. This section included one of the finest paintings in the show, Homer's *Eagle Head, Manchester, Massachusetts, High Tide*, showing three young female bathers and their dog on the beach, as well as the iconic female bicyclist of Will Bradley's 1895 lithograph *Victor Bicycles and Overman Wheel Co.*, and illustrations by William Chandler Christy and Charles Dana Gibson of beautiful young girls in shirtwaists and long skirts golfing and playing tennis. The inclusion of popular magazine illustrations and posters in both book and exhibition served to democratize the subject of the New Woman and to help contextualize the larger, more formal portraits by Chase, Sargent, and Thomas Eakins in the final section of the exhibition. Also seen here, though not in the book, was Kate Carl's striking half-length equestrian portrait of Bessie Vance Brooks, presenting this New Woman riding, crop in hand.

Ending the exhibition with the monumental portraits by the male masters of late-nineteenth-century American painting left one to question how these subjects represented the New Woman. Connor argues that their active poses (e.g., Eakins's *The Concert Singer* [1890-92]) vivacious personalities (e.g., Chase's *Lydia Field Emmet* [c. 1893]), and costumes (e.g., Sargent's *Mr. and Mrs. Isaac Newton Phelps Stokes* [1897]) are

evidence of their identities as New Women. However, after the tantalizing look at feminine freedoms found in the images of women reading, playing, bicycling, and studying, and paintings executed by women, the exhibition seemed to veer off course. After a thrilling ride that culminated in Austen's photographs of New Women acting like Free Women, the show ended with images of lushly costumed young women who appear to have accepted society's established definitions and boundaries. Fortunately, what was missing in the exhibition is very present in the book, which includes works like Sargent's *Portrait of Miss Carey Thomas*,

President of Bryn Mawr College, Chase's 1883 *Portrait of Miss Dora Wheeler* (co-founder with her mother Candace of Associated Artists), and numerous paintings by Cassatt. Just one of these in the final room would have given the impression, as claimed by the exhibition, that innovative artists were fascinated by the New Woman (rather than the middle-of-the-road Real Woman). In Blanchard's essay, which concludes the book, she writes, "In the end, ...artists like Johnston and Austen were the harbingers of new thought, new identities, and new gender roles that are now accepted in a modern world." (124) I wish the exhibition, too, had ended on such an inspired note. •

Donna Gustafson is an art historian and independent curator. Her latest exhibition, "Transformative Portraits: Altered Identities in Contemporary Art," opened in November 2006 at Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania.

NOTES

1. From the Newark Museum, where it was on view March 18-June 18, 2006, the show traveled to Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, July 26-October 15, 2006, and to Frick Art and Historical Center, Pittsburgh, November 4, 2006-January 14, 2007.

Framing Women

edited by Sandra Carroll, Birgit Pretzsch and Peter Wagner
Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2003

Reviewed by Melissa Percival

The notion of the frame in art has been discussed from a variety of critical perspectives in recent years—deconstructionist, cultural and formal. In the volume of essays reviewed here, the frame is applied to issues of gender, specifically the representation of women in art, literature, and popular culture. Framing is defined by the editors as the way in which women's representation is conditioned, albeit perhaps subtly and silently, by the prevailing mentality of a particular age. Hence the authors analyze how women have had frames imposed on them in a constraining, overly deterministic way. They also show how women have successfully resisted and reworked these frames.

The book is ambitious in terms of its historical spectrum and range of material. It focuses on two periods, the Enlightenment and Postmodernism. The editors' justification for excluding the nineteenth century is that it is well-trodden ground in terms of scholarship of constructions of women in word and

image, whereas they consider the periods under scrutiny here to be less well charted. That point will be disputed by some, but there is certainly great potential for juxtaposing the eighteenth and late-twentieth centuries. An obvious difference is the Enlightenment quest to place a coherent frame of meaning on things versus Postmodernism acceptance of, even embracing of, multiple and contradictory frames that do not lay claim to a single truth. The juxtaposition of the two periods also reveals some parallels, for the editors are struck by the persistence of Enlightenment assumptions about women in contemporary society. Thus one important "frame" of this book is to explore what has remained constant and what has changed between the two periods.

In their carefully argued introduction, the editors present an overview of the history of frames and mentalities from the Renaissance to the present, and provide useful summaries of each essay. In the Renaissance, they argue, visual representation of women was primarily shaped by classical and biblical sources. In later periods, artists such as William Hogarth, Francisco Goya and Edouard Manet are construed as "frame-breakers" for their knowing—and shocking—displacement of traditional iconography to a new sphere. Women artists such as Cindy

Sherman explicitly draw attention to the confining roles used to frame women (in the sense of a "set-up") in contemporary Western society. There is a slight tension between this chronological examination and the editors' explicit rejection of any teleological development. Also problematic, for reasons outlined below, is the inclusion in the middle of the book of an essay on the fin de siècle illustrator Aubrey Beardsley. But such quibbles should be offset by the editors' evident concern to cover all bases, in what is already a very wide field.

The book intentionally underscores the "intermedial" nature of art and literature—the fact that writing cannot do without the supplements provided by art—and vice versa. Consequently many different media are discussed—fine art, prints, journalism, legal reports, book illustration, drama, animated cartoons, video and computer games. This proliferation of media is equally apparent in both eighteenth- and twentieth-century sections; however, visual subjects are less well represented in the second half of the collection. The authors, a number of whom are scholars of international renown, represent different disciplines: history, art history, literature, and gender studies. The essays are engrossing and rigorously argued. Given the quantity and range of

material, this review cannot give equal weight to all contributions, but will refer, at least in passing, to all of them.

The first section on the eighteenth century opens with an essay by the late Roy Porter on "fallen women." It reveals that century as a pivotal moment in the history of female sexuality. Porter argues that a combination of shifts in theology, biology and social attitudes led to a crystallization around two opposites: woman as virtuous and woman as fallen. The perception of prostitutes too was polarized into good and bad. The "good" prostitute was sentimentalized in literature, and even exonerated through an Enlightenment discourse that lamented the ills of society rather than blaming the individual. Porter's investigation of prostitutes' lives in Georgian London includes some absorbing period details from journalism, fiction and court records. This is a chance to savor one of his last essays.

Angela Rosenthal is interested in the ways in which women, instead of being trapped within frames, actively work to shape or to reject them. The subject of her essay is the self-imagery of the notorious London courtesan, Kitty Fisher. Courtesans such as Fisher enjoyed fame and wealth, but were vulnerable to criticisms of their unorthodox and immoral lifestyle. Rosenthal argues persuasively that, through her portraits, Fisher was able to respond to her critics. Her collaboration with Joshua Reynolds is analyzed in detail, their project seen as having mutual benefits for both artist and sitter. One such mutually promoting painting shows Fisher as Cleopatra, in an elegantly distracted pose that is more fashionably eighteenth century than Ancient Egyptian (85). For Fisher, the symbolism of wealth, power, and queenship successfully enhanced her reputation. For Reynolds, the painting was an excursion beyond portraiture into more prestigious subject painting. Rosenthal intersperses her subtly suggestive close readings of works by Reynolds, Thomas Rowlandson and Nathaniel Hone with contemporary popular verse.

The volume includes Bernadette Fort's absorbing essay on Jean-Baptiste Greuze's framing of his wife's image. The author

identifies approximately one dozen images of Madame Greuze executed in the early, happy, years of their marriage (which later turned sour). This first ever systematic investigation of images of Madame Greuze is to be welcomed, although, as Fort acknowledges, it is probably the tip of the iceberg: some works have undoubtedly been lost, but also the features of Greuze's wife seamlessly permeate portraits, fantasy portraits, genre scenes and expressive heads in ways that dissipate the notion of resemblance. The problematic representations of female sexuality produced by Greuze throughout his career are found to have their basis in images of his wife. The highly sexualized images of Madame Greuze in intimate domestic states—asleep, pregnant, post-orgasmic—break contemporary taboos about womanhood, but Fort sees them as anything but liberating for women. Instead, Greuze's strategy of "visual pandering" (99), as she labels it, invites the male beholder to participate in the consumption of his voluptuous wife in an intimate setting. Diderot is a willing accomplice, she suggests, as is the leering notary in *L'Accordée de Village*.

The book's first section includes an intriguing rereading by Thomas Krämer of Hogarth's *A Harlot's Progress* 2 that introduces the theme of cross-dressing, and concludes with an essay by Werner Wolf on the ambivalent gender issues raised by sensibility. These eighteenth-century chapters cohere well, linked by the common theme of female sexuality.

The second part of the book opens with an essay by James A. W. Heffernan on Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of Wilde's *Salomé* and Pope's *Rape of the Lock*. Beardsley's darkly sexual fin de siècle reworking of Pope's mock heroic epic revolves around hair fetishes, priapic candles and spermatozoic-looking locks, and features a lugubrious pair of scissors absent from the original verse. Wilde's *Salomé* is aggressively sexualized by Beardsley, in a way that shocked contemporary audiences. In a key image, *The Climax* (178), she is depicted gazing at the head of John the Baptist with demonic eyebrows, dark tendril-like hair and protruding chin. Medusa-like, her conquest is so supreme that she has even projected onto him a head of snake-hair.

Heffernan's essay is excellent, but in terms of the "frame" of this particular book, namely its juxtaposition of Enlightenment and Postmodernism, it is an awkward fit. The editors try to suggest that it forms a bridge between the two periods by virtue of the reworking of an eighteenth-century poet. But this explanation is unconvincing, as it seems to inform neither period. Moreover, this piece addresses only tangentially the subject of framing and gender, its real subject being the illustrator's creative (and shocking) independence from the literary text. One is sympathetic to the difficulties facing editors, who must be mindful to balance quality with the overall shape of the book. One wonders too if there were other nineteenth-century contributors at some stage who might also have bridged the gap. But given the editors' professed intention to eschew teleology, then is there really a need to create such chronological bridges? Whatever the reasons, this essay, despite its merits, is an unsettling presence. It would have been a hard but pragmatic editorial decision to omit it.

While essays on the eighteenth century concentrate mainly on England, the geographical spread of the second, post-modern, half is broader, covering Europe and the Americas. Sandra Carroll's "Natural Born Quilter" is a fascinating reading of Margaret Atwood's novel, *Alias Grace*. The novel is constructed around the nineteenth-century *cause célèbre*, Grace Marks, a housemaid charged with murder of her employer and his pregnant mistress/housekeeper. The novel weaves together fictional, legal and journalistic accounts of her life, and thus comprises a dense network of narrative frames that resemble a patchwork quilt, the novel's central metaphor. Carroll's attention is drawn to the edges (or frames) of fabric, the numerous thresholds of narrative, or paratexts, that displace and refocus narrative meaning. The patchwork motif also echoes Grace's own search for identity, in terms of the prescriptive choices that are open to a woman of her class at that time. It also reflects the central character, but who exists in three frames: alleged murderer, naive innocent, and servant girl in search of identity, but who is ultimately unknowable. Grace's person and situa-

tion are further refracted through reproductions of two famous paintings that she sees in her employer's house: Susanna and the Elders (artist unspecified) and Ingres' *La Grande Odalisque*. The encounter with these images that thematize female sexuality and transgression, paradoxically reveal Grace to be both more innocent and more sexually aware than she has hitherto seemed.

Also in this section is an essay by Brigitte Glaser on the role of female scientists in recent British drama. Peter Wagner writes on visual representations of women in Cormac McCarthy, and Ottmar Ette's subject is gender and the body in Hispanic culture. Jan Hollm finds Shakespearian analogies in Disney's *The Lion King*, concluding that while the movie pays lip service to equality of gender and sexuality, it continues to perpetuate old stereotypes. Since visual readings are somewhat lacking in this postmodern section of the book, this essay could perhaps have built on its discussion of character and thematics by addressing visual aspects of the movie.

In the volume's concluding essay, Birgit Pretzsch asks whether Lara Croft (the video game character) is a liberating feminist icon or a reactionary object of male desire. She surveys the virtual heroine's multiple media appearances—in the

computer games that first launched her, and their numerous spin-offs—movies, magazine covers, merchandise, the internet and advertising. Pretzsch finds that, while Lara Croft seemingly embodies an ideal kind of femininity—a lone-ranger type that is independent, physically robust, sexy and charming—she is far from being a female role model. The author cites the dearth of products that are specifically aimed at women, and points out that Croft's impossibly idealized body type in fact only alienates women. Moreover, the confusion of boundaries between real and virtual worlds unleashes the most blatant sexism (“You can move me into 2000 different positions. Try that with your girlfriend!”). Pretzsch concludes that Lara Croft is merely a cleverly marketed commodity that feeds male fantasies to manipulate and control a woman's body. Certainly the illustrations chosen to illustrate this essay, taken from the German *Lara Croft Magazin*, seem to bear out this assertion, for they show Lara in stock poses of female seduction, of which several verge on the pornographic: in one image she appears in a skimpy Gucci bikini while brandishing a shotgun, looking blankly yet provocatively over her shoulder, her hair tousled, her lips parted. There are

echoes here of Fort's essay on Greuze: under the guise of progressiveness, male creators, complicit with their male audience, actually reinforce gender stereotypes, and seek to imprison women even more firmly within rigid frames.

Understandably, the notion of the frame that is central to this volume is interpreted differently by individual contributors. Several authors find overlaps with the term “role,” or “role-play” (the work of Judith Butler informs a number of essays). Others choose to see the frame as synonymous with representation itself. The essays by Rosenthal, Fort and Carroll are among those that most successfully theorize the frame in and of itself. The black and white illustrations are well chosen and, for the most part, sharply reproduced. Despite the minor editorial weaknesses alluded to above, this is an extremely rich, varied and absorbing collection, and would be a valuable contribution to any library. •

Melissa Percival, Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Exeter, UK, was Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of California Santa Barbara in 2005-06. Her latest project is a book on the “figures de fantaisie” of Jean-Honoré Fragonard.

Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné

by Barbara Buhler Lynes
Yale University Press, 1999

Reviewed by Sascha Scott

When Barbara Buhler Lynes's two-volume *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné* was published a few years ago, it was arguably the most important publication on O'Keeffe. Among the most celebrated American female painters of the twentieth century, O'Keeffe's fame has always been a double-edged sword. Fascinated by the sexualized object of Alfred Stieglitz's 1910s photographs, or intrigued by the

Southwestern priestess in black, critics have said much about the artist's life and comparatively little about her art. Due perhaps in equal parts to limited access to her work, the lure of her mythic persona, and “creative” scholarship, there is a tendency to interpret O'Keeffe's art through the lens of her life. Biography is still the dominant methodology in O'Keeffe literature, and as a result of such intense focus on the artist's life, her art has not received the multivalent methodological treatment it deserves. The publication of this catalogue raisonné is a crucial step in remedying this situation.

An impressive list of collaborators lends scholarly gravity to the publication. Lynes, curator of the Georgia O'Keeffe

Museum and author of a number of meticulously researched texts on O'Keeffe,¹ received advice from O'Keeffe scholars Wanda Corn, Sarah Greenough, and Charles Eldredge, among others. Backing the project were a small army of supporters, the Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, and the National Gallery of Art. The expense and legal headaches involved in publishing a catalogue raisonné are well known, adding to the appreciation of this publication covering O'Keeffe's seven-decade career.

With 2,045 high-quality reproductions of O'Keeffe's work, all in color, and just shy of 2000 pages, the volumes are substantial. Visually, it is lush, crisp, even stunning. In fifteen pages of introductory text Lynes maps the catalogue's



Fig. 1. Georgia O'Keeffe *Blue II* (1958), oil on canvas, 30" x 26". Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe. (c) 2006 Georgia O'Keeffe Museum/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe/Art Resource, N.Y.

organizational scheme, explaining her curatorial choices regarding its structure, the method of data collection, guidelines for reproducing images, and the complexities of gathering information from the various O'Keeffe archives and collections.² Of particular value to the O'Keeffe researcher, Lynes details her archival sources and how she prioritized them. Instead of relegating this information to an appendix, she explains her choices up front, including her curatorial decisions made in dating and identifying the works. Such an open and direct discussion of methodology is enlightening and leaves few questions unanswered.

Within the catalogue, O'Keeffe's works are arranged by year and grouped by dominant subject matter, with one exception. Lynes explains that because of O'Keeffe's virtually nomadic existence between 1916 and 1918, the works from these years are arranged strictly chronologically, thus keeping together works executed in a particular geographic location. One wonders if it was logistically impossible for Lynes to organize every year in this way, since O'Keeffe traveled

frequently throughout her life. For instance, in 1931, She spent time in New York City and Lake George, New York; in Taos, New Mexico; and at York Beach, Maine. While a strictly chronological approach would have created a seamless consistency throughout the catalogue and remained faithful to the artist's life, the thematic organization of the material highlights O'Keeffe's preoccupations within any given year. Further, the intermixing of works produced in a variety of media is both refreshing and revealing, giving the reader insight into O'Keeffe's approach to formal problems and her methods of acquainting herself with new locations.

It is notable that Lynes included neither an interpretative essay nor a biographical essay. (A detailed chronology of the artist's life is found in an appendix.) In her Preface, Lynes asserts that "...the decision to exclude any interpretive essay or extensive interpretive comments in the catalogue entries respects O'Keeffe's own idea of what she was about. She always implied that the work was the only real voice of an artist: it must be allowed to speak for itself" (21). The decision to forgo biographical and interpretive essays suggests something about the current state of research on O'Keeffe. Practical issues aside—the inclusion of scholarly essays would have taken the volumes from hefty to backbreaking—writing a biography, even one that is relatively barebones, is not easy when the focus is O'Keeffe. O'Keeffe enthusiasts have an emotional attachment to the artist, or rather, to the vision of the artist they embrace. Reading the many O'Keeffe biographies is like reading about the lives of different people. Depending on who is telling the story, she is a strong-willed, independent, hypersexual woman who controlled her life and her image; or she is an easily manipulated, repressed bisexual, who unwillingly became the fetishized object of Stieglitz's desire. Biographers often present crustean interpretations of O'Keeffe's

works to suit their needs. By leaving out a biographical essay, there is little to divert our attention. Rather, the focus on the work offers the reader a chance to get to know O'Keeffe, the artist, through her *art* and not through the shifting interpretations of her life.

In spite of the exclusion of interpretive essays per se, the catalogue entries include text that can be understood as interpretive. Indeed, the entries are at their best when the "remarks" include the artist's quotes concerning her work along with relevant historical or biographical information. Deciding which works warrant this kind of elaboration constitutes an interpretive statement in itself, as does choosing which quotes to use in conjunction with a particular work of art.

The diversity of the artist's production as presented in this illuminating scholarly tool and comprehensive library of images delivers a number of pleasant surprises. For example, while scholars argue that O'Keeffe moved away from abstraction in the 1920s, reinserting the object into her works, the catalogue makes it clear that, throughout her life, O'Keeffe simultaneously produced object- or landscape-based abstractions alongside more literal interpretations of those subjects. Adding to the confusion is that scholars frequently conflate "abstraction" and "non-objectivity" in discussions of O'Keeffe's work. Did she *really* abandon the natural world? Or were her prewar abstractions as rooted in or inspired by nature as her postwar work? Looking through the catalogue, one notices that, almost on a yearly basis and even later in her life, O'Keeffe translated at least one of her visions of the natural world into a powerful abstraction, as she did in *Blue II* (1958; Fig. 1) The progression of O'Keeffe's career is more aptly described as a coil than a line; throughout her life, she adopts, leaves behind, and then readopts diverse styles and subject matter.

Prior to this publication, most O'Keeffe scholars focused on her works located in major collections, those most frequently reproduced. This catalogue raisonné has enabled a broader look at works housed in private and lesser-known collections as well as those at

major institutions but seldom on view. A wealth of additional contextual and archival materials complete the catalogue, with appendices containing the artist's statements, signature examples, works in public institutions, and a detailed chronology. Particularly engaging are the installation views of O'Keeffe's work as documented by Stieglitz, and the numerous O'Keeffe sketchbooks that have been reproduced in their entirety.³

Lynes concludes by saying:

The perception of Georgia O'Keeffe's output is not likely to be altered significantly by the publication of this catalogue: she has been among the most frequently exhibited and reviewed American artists of this century. It is improbable that anyone documenting the *oeuvre* of an artist

of her stature would discover anything, fact or object, that would lead to a dramatic change in the public or scholarly perception of that artist's contribution to an age (21).

Lynes's modest statement belies the significance of this work whose publication is a vital step in encouraging more scholars to write about O'Keeffe's art, not just her life. *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné* has been welcomed by students of early American modernism as well as O'Keeffe enthusiasts. •

Sascha Scott is a doctoral candidate at Rutgers University and a pre-doctoral fellow at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, where she is completing her dissertation on modernist painting in the American Southwest.

NOTES

1. See Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also Barbara Buhler Lynes, Lesley Poling-Kempes, and Frederick W. Turner, *Georgia O'Keeffe and New Mexico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum is located in Santa Fe, New Mexico.
2. The introduction includes a Guide to Symbols & Abbreviations and a Guide to Entries. Other contributions include a Foreword by Earl A. Powell III, Director of the National Gallery of Art, and Elizabeth Glassman, President Emerita of The Georgia O'Keeffe Foundation, and a Paper Survey by Judith C. Walsh, with comments on cataloguing O'Keeffe's works on paper.
3. Lynes's *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916-1929* included 90 articles about O'Keeffe's work.

Women Potters, Transforming Traditions

by Moira Vincentelli.
Rutgers University Press, 2004.

Rustic Cubism, Anne Dangar and the Art Colony at Moly-Sabata

by Bruce Adams.
University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Magdalene Odundo

edited by Anthony Slayter-Ralph.
Lund Humphries, 2004.

Reviewed by Pamela H. Simpson

It is often claimed that women were the first potters. While there is no way to know if that is true, it is clear that women have been associated with ceramics since ancient times, and even today, women tend to dominate the field of traditional pottery. The associations with the earth, the connections to giving life to new forms, even the practical, domestic aspects of ceramic use, all connect women to this craft. These three books are about women potters.

The first, Moira Vincentelli's *Women Potters*, is a worldwide survey of the way women have been involved in the making of traditional pottery. She organizes her study geographically, and starting with Europe, works her way through Africa, Asia, Oceania, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Her focus is on the gendered aspects of pottery-making, and her conclusion is that women's roles are strongest when the technology is simple. Men tend to be involved where there is a tradition of wheel-throwing, kiln-firing and glazing, or where ceramics are highly valued and profitable. Women tend to be involved where the forms are hand built, unglazed and fired in a bonfire and associated with necessary cooking and storage forms. There are plenty of places where pottery-making involves both sexes, of course, but Vincentelli shows that there is a strong tradition of female dominance in this low-technology end of the craft, and that it is a pattern that can be traced worldwide.

This is what is new in this study. While there has been much ethnographical work on individual areas, few have looked at how these techniques are repeated in various cultures. Vincentelli shows the

similarities in technique, in history, and in how craft is passed from one generation to another among women across the globe. She also shows a convincing pattern of how women may have dominated this craft historically, but now face challenges in the modern world where a plastic bucket might be readily available and deemed a better vessel for carrying water. The answer for many potters has been to transform their craft into something aimed at the tourist trade. Today's "cultural tourism," the internet, and the rise of interest in crafts have sometimes modified these forms so that cooking pots and ceramic airplanes sit side by side in roadside markets.

Unlike the art connoisseurs who lament such change and the "debasement" it brings, Vincentelli takes a more open and fluid attitude. Today's airport art might be tomorrow's treasures. Just as Chinese export porcelain was once despised as inferior but is now collected in museums, so too the tourist-oriented pots and figurines might someday be valued for what they reflect of the contemporary culture. The important point is how the women manage to survive, retain their craft, and still find a reason for production.

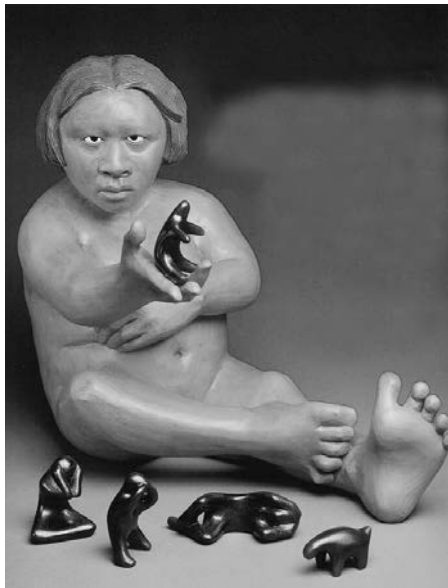


Fig. 1. 1. Roxanne Swentzell, *Pueblo Figurines for Sale* (1999), terracotta, h. 19". A Doty, Larsen Collection.

A few women have risen to superstar status as traditional pottery has become valued. Nesta Nala of South Africa is one example. For more than twenty-five years, she has marketed her fine-walled, delicately decorated black pots through a craft center in Durban. Her largely female household of four generations is all involved in the production. She still lives far from the city, digs her clay locally, shapes her pots with an anvil (a rounded stone) and a wooden paddle, and fires them in her yard in a dried aloe leaf bonfire before hand-polishing them. Her daughter, Jabu, has recently moved to Johannesburg, where she makes very large pieces aimed solely at the international art market.

Probably one of the best-known examples of this move from traditional potter to art star is the American Maria Martinez (1887-1980) who was part of a matriarchal line of San Ildefonso potters in New Mexico. She learned her craft from her aunt and headed a family enterprise that included her husband, sons, and daughter-in-law. She and her husband, Julian, demonstrated at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904, the year they were married, and later were invited to live at the Museum of New Mexico as

resident interpreters of native culture. There, in about 1919, they developed their shiny, black-on-black technique that drew from ancient pottery motifs. This fit perfectly with the Southwest Revival, Art Deco taste, and new interest in Native American crafts. Maria became a world-famous potter who was invited to the White House four times, was visited by such famous studio potters as Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew, and was a living symbol of Pueblo culture. Even contemporary potters see her as a revered ancestor, though some, like Roxanne Swentzell, whose satiric "Pueblo Figurines for Sale" (Fig. 1) adorns the cover of the book, also see a mixed blessing in the popularization of Pueblo art and the selling of culture.

There are other examples of famous traditional potters as well, but Vincentelli is more interested in the anonymous women who show up in historic accounts, or whom she met in her vast travels. They are women like Marlene "Muchie" Roden, who lives on the edge of Spanish Town in Jamaica and makes cooking pots that she sells out of her yard and at a few tourist outlets in Kingston. She makes functional wares in the traditional manner, digging the clay in her yard, flattening a pancake of it over a saucer and then pulling the sides up as she works with a gourd to round the pot. After drying, it is smoothed and covered with red slip and then burnished before firing in a bonfire of sticks. Once the pot is in the market, the tourist-buyer has no way to know the hard work and craft that went into the making of what simply looks like a terracotta pot. Roden learned the craft from her mother, but her daughter has no interest in continuing the trade. None of her neighbors have much interest in cooking in them. Even slum dwellers have stoves and metal cooking pots now. One wonders how long the tradition will last.

Vincentelli, a senior lecturer in art history and curator of ceramics at the University of Wales, is optimistic and believes that traditional potters will continue to adapt since they are the keepers of cultural meaning for their societies. She also sees them as part of a global pattern of women's work that has often been ignored. Her book is

beautifully illustrated with maps, contemporary color photographs, and black and white historical ones. She includes a section on terms and techniques as well as an extensive bibliography. If there is criticism to be made, it might be that given the breadth of the survey, there is often a frustrating lack of depth. One continent after another is summarized in a chapter, with each country or region getting a page or less. There are footnotes and references to bibliography that could lead to further study, but the story itself for individual areas, or for individuals, is so brief there is little room for nuance.

Fortunately, that is not the case in the other two books under review.

Bruce Adams's study of the modern potter, Anne Dangar (1885-1951) is a full-blown, 284-page monograph with 150 black and white illustrations and 24 color plates. It covers not only Dangar's life and work, but also tells the story in rich detail of her twenty-one years at Moly-Sabata, the art colony founded in 1927 by the Cubist painter Albert Gleizes.

The idea of applying Cubist designs to ceramics and other everyday objects was something explored by many artists in the early-twentieth century: Sonia Delaunay, the English Omega Workshops, the Russian modernists, even the Bauhaus offer parallels. But Gleizes's Moly-Sabata was different. His concept of Cubism was grounded in the contemporary "return to the earth" movement and rejected the machine as well as the modern city. Instead, he championed rural life, the French peasant, Celtic traditions, Romanesque art, and Catholic fundamentalism. It was a Cubism that claimed that all design—medieval and modern—was based on certain universal principles; its goal was nothing less than the renewal of culture. Because of its rejection of urbanism and its embrace of the rural, Adams calls it "Rustic Cubism."

Anne Dangar was Gleizes's most devoted disciple. An Australian who had first trained as an Impressionist, she traveled to Paris in the 1920s like so many other eager young art students. André Lhote was her first teacher to introduce her to Cubism, but it was the polemic writings of Gleizes that inspired

her lifelong work. In 1930 Gleizes, hearing of her admiration and her desire to learn more, invited her to join the art colony he had founded in the Rhône Valley at Moly-Sabata in Sablons.

It was a fairly dysfunctional art colony where few artists stayed for long. Gleizes had strict ideas about the holy-order-like setting where artists were suppose to raise their own food, do his prints and bidding, support themselves, take care of the buildings, and still find time for their own work. He owned the buildings and was the leader, but he was rarely there. He lived in comfort in a nearby village when he was not spending time in one of the three other homes his wealthy wife provided for him. Still, despite all the comings and goings of her fellow artists, Anne Dangar stayed. She stayed even through the worst of times in World War II when she was briefly sent to a concentration camp. More than anyone else, she embodied Gleizes's ideas by applying his Cubist theory to the vernacular pottery traditions of the area.

The result was a spectacular body of work that is today widely recognized, collected, and much in demand. The tiles, plates, and vessels were done in local clay with local techniques and in collaboration with local potteries, but the designs are her interpretation of the circles, spirals, and geometric rotations that she derived from Gleizes's theories and that she saw as fundamental to all art. Her goal was not simply to make beautiful objects, but in the making to find a spiritual center for herself as well for the user.

Adams's study benefited greatly from the fact that Dangar was a prolific letter-writer, so he had much to draw upon for telling her story. He is also a gifted writer and the result is a compelling narrative. It is to his credit that one can finish this biography feeling that it was a fascinating account, but not always liking the artists. Dangar was headstrong, rigid, narrow in her views, often ungenerous in her judgments, and blind in her admiration of Gleizes. One likes him even less. He was arrogant, patronizing, and exploitive. But for all of that, one comes to understand the period and how the alternative discourse

Gleizes and Dangar represented led to such beautiful works of art.

A richly illustrated, meticulously researched, thoroughly documented, and thoughtfully presented book, Adams's study will undoubtedly lead others to explore this important period in French history.

The third book under consideration, Anthony Slayter-Ralph's presentation of the work of Magdalene Odundo, is much smaller in scope but even more richly illustrated only about—44 of the 128 pages are text, the rest are all pictures, many in brilliant color. It is essentially a catalogue of Odundo's work to date, with introductory essays by Emmanuel Cooper and Simon Olding, who explain her background, education, career, and methods of working.

Born in Nairobi in 1950, Odundo worked for a while as a commercial artist before going to England to study in 1973. Her first training was as a sculptor, and that shows in her dynamic ceramic designs. While she was still a student she met and was influenced by the two most famous studio potters of her day, Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew. In fact, she spent one summer working at Cardew's Abuja Centre in Nigeria. There she learned the hand-building techniques of the Gwari women. Later she wrote a thesis on the ceremonial vessels of her native Kenya. So, she knows African pottery, but her own work, while having reference to that tradition, also draws on sources that range from Greek Cycladic art to Brancusi. She even met Maria Martinez in 1979, and says that the distinctive black finish on her Pueblo ware was another influence. The work that Odundo has created draws on all of this, but is entirely her own. Presented here in breathtaking photographs (See for example, Pl. 11), it is more than beautiful; it is as Simon Olding notes, "work intended for a deeper reflection; work intended to make us pause" (64).

The problem for Odundo is that people want to put her in a pigeonhole. When her work was first shown in the United States in 1991, she was classified as an African artist, even though she has done all her mature work in England,

where she still lives and teaches. Moira Vincentelli, with her interest in worldwide cultural patterns, seizes on the fact that Odundo hand builds her pieces, often uses a black finish, and hand polishes them, to place her in the vernacular tradition of women potters. There is also a feminist aspect to the work since many of the pieces evoke a metaphor for the female body. Odundo refuses to commit to any of these readings and says, "I will only draw from Africa if it suits me in my quest for perfect simplicity, for natural forms" (53). The work itself is stunning, and so is this beautiful book.

So, here are three books to whet the appetite for anyone interested in women potters. One is a broad survey of traditional pottery, the second an in-depth study of one woman working in the 1930s and 1940s in France, and the third a catalogue of the work of a contemporary studio artist who is gaining worldwide attention. Certain universal features link them, especially the magic of using the earth itself as the medium, of shaping the clay into useful forms, and then exposing them to fire in a transforming act of alchemy. Whether or not women were the first potters, they have certainly continued to offer important expressions of this art and craft. •

Pamela Simpson, a long-time reviewer for *WAJ*, is the Ernest Williams II Professor of Art History at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, VA. Her most recent book, co-edited with Cindy Mills, is *Monuments to the Lost Cause, Women, Art and the Landscapes of Southern Memory* (2003). She is currently at work on a book on corn palaces and butter sculpture.

Wild Girls—Paris, Sappho and Art: The Lives & Loves of Natalie Barney & Romaine Brooks

by Diana Souhami.
St. Martin's, 2005.

Reviewed by Cassandra Langer

Drawing from the letters, papers, and paintings of Natalie Barney (1876-1972) and Romaine Brooks (1874-1970), Diana Souhami, the book jacket claims, "recreates the lives and loves of this pair of dazzling and wild women." Setting the tone, the provocative *Wild Girls* cover image shows a corset being laced by a woman with blood-red nails.

Interspersed among the book's thirty short chapters, most focusing on various members of the couple's wide circle, Souhami has interjected twenty-five (numbered) autobiographical "discursions," which this reviewer found disruptive and distracting. Readers may admire Souhami for examining such delicate subjects as sexual orientation, abortion, and social inequality in relation to the lives of Barney and Brooks (referred to throughout as Natalie and Romaine) and their friends. Sourced with unobtrusive notes, the author weaves a lively story out of the myriad artists and characters that contributed to this golden age in Paris. While this method of citing sources may be appropriately informal, the notes are unforgivably incomplete—this reader, looking for the source of a quote, as often as not was disappointed (and irritated). Nineteen black and white and twelve color illustrations give faces and personalities to some of the names.

The first eleven chapters focus on important people and places in Barney's life before she and Brooks met in 1915. Celebrated for her "bon mots," affairs, and libertine lifestyle, Barney's greatest achievement was her Friday salon. Her Fridays at 20 rue Jacob provided an important and radical context in which members of the nobility, artists, writers, and intellectuals of the day could exchange ideas across barriers of class, gender, nationality, economic standing, and religion. Women, gays, and Jews—whose participation in official public life

often was restricted—mixed. In attendance was a who's who of American and European cultural luminaries:

Down the years the list of visitors accrued, a compendium of artists. To Natalie's "dazzling Fridays" they brought their creations: their poems, stories, dances, quartets, and songs. Gertrude Stein, Colette, and Edith Sitwell read work in progress. Pierre Louÿs brought André Gide and Paul Valéry. Natalie's teacher, Charles Brun, brought the critic Salomon Reinach. And so it snowballed. Romaine Brooks, Janet Flanner, Djuna Barnes, Dolly Wilde, Nancy Cunard, Peggy Guggenheim, Radclyffe Hall, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Rabindranath Tagore, Jean Cocteau, Rainer Maria Rilke, all called at Natalie's salon for the cutting edge of art, and strawberry tarts (62-63).

Souhami opens her discussion of Brooks in chapter 12 by introducing Romaine and her family: her mother Ella Waterman Goddard, sister Maya, and mentally disturbed brother St. Mar, on whom their mother doted. A physician often accompanied the four Goddards as they moved regularly from one city to another, on America's East Coast and among the capitals of Europe. Mentioning only briefly significant parts of Brooks's horrendously abusive childhood, including being handed over by her mother to live in poverty with their "Irish washerwoman, Mrs. Hickey" (86),¹ Souhami ends this section with Brooks's teenage suicide attempt after being reunited with her family in Florence (88). Here, for example, readers trying to appreciate Brooks's suffering during this period find themselves rudely interrupted by one of Souhami's personal "discursions."

The author gives a few details about Brooks's tumultuous early affairs, singling out those with the writer Gabriele d'Annunzio, and with his (and her) muse, the exotic dancer Ida Rubinstein. Both are subjects of well-known paintings by Brooks, the portrait

Gabriele d'Annunzio, the Poet in Exile (1912), and for Rubinstein *The Crossing* (1911) and *The Cross of France* (1914). The relationship with d'Annunzio, as their letters make clear, was one of the most passionate in her life.² Also, in asserting that "Romaine, for her part, had no interest in salon life" (2), Souhami takes Brooks at her word. In fact, Brooks took a great interest in salon life when she arrived in Paris in 1905 and was establishing herself as a serious artist.

Throughout the book Barney appears as witty and personable, a luscious physical presence, a confident seductress who can claim anyone or anything she wants. By contrast Brooks appears as a gloomy, gothic persona: closed off from life, often otherworldly and humorless, even nasty. "For Romaine," Souhami writes, "Natalie's warmth and kindness were an unfamiliar gift. Natalie was not judgemental, nor did she recoil from the drama of Romaine's life, but the relationship was based on an understanding that Romaine must be above comparison" (137). She also quotes Brooks as saying "Natalie was a miracle. As fresh as a spring morning. I had never found a real woman friend before" (134).³ (Here as elsewhere in the book, Souhami's quote is inaccurate and lacks a proper citation.)

Barney, on the other hand seemed attracted to Brooks's "strangeness and vulnerability" and her "understanding that Romaine must be above comparison" (137). The couple's correspondence and other biographical sources provide more insights into Brooks's complex personality and physical attractions—she could be enormously funny and alluring. The connection was deep, and Souhami gives the occasional clue, such as including (but not documenting) Barney's summing up of their relationship: "I belonged to everyone, she belonged to no one: we considered ourselves quite different, and yet in our loneliness we were alike" (198).

Eerily, though very briefly, in chapter 17 Souhami describes the deaths of Brooks's mother and brother (within a year of each other.) At her mother's death, in 1902, Brooks came into a vast fortune. With the means and will to create a life of her own making, she disposed of the dead's belongings while

remaining haunted by their images and voices (110). As Brooks later wrote, “the death of my mother and brother had not liberated me mentally and I felt that some part of me still remained with them.”⁵ Soon after, living in England, she impulsively married John Ellingham Brooks, quickly abandoning him, though with an allowance for life. By 1905 she was establishing herself in Paris.

Souhami gives readers a vivid description of lesbian life in Paris at the turn of the century and during the 1920s in London, where Brooks joined company with Radclyffe Hall, Una Troubridge and other British and American lesbians. The flirtation between Brooks and Hall is highlighted in chapter 23, as are Troubridge’s nine sittings for Brooks’s 1924 portrait of her with monocle and dachshunds (See p. 5, Fig. 3). Readers glimpse inside the eccentric lives and interrelationships of these independent (also independently wealthy) lesbians. Souhami also sets forth the artistic milieu in which they plied their talents and insecurities as well as the unforgiving political context of the day.

Barney and Brooks had many affairs during their forty-year, open relationship. Their very different lifestyles—the outgoing Barney loving people and parties, and Brooks preferring quiet and work—were played out for the most part in separate homes (or separate halves of a shared home) (152-53). One of the most troubling liaisons was Barney’s with Dolly Wilde (Oscar’s niece), beginning in 1927. Here Souhami’s too-simplistic version of events paints Brooks as petty and jealous, rather than as concerned that Barney was being taken advantage of by a woman unworthy of her. A drug addict, Wilde also was irresponsible when it came to money—Natalie’s money! Souhami touches on their conflict, quoting Brooks: “‘Your life at present is infested with rats, & one of these rats is gnawing at the very foundation of our friendship.’ That rat was Dolly” (153).⁶ In the end, Brooks gave Barney an ultimatum, threatening to leave, and, protesting, Barney packed Wilde off to London. Later, when Wilde was broke and suffering from cancer, a sympathetic Brooks sent her a generous check.

Not until the years of World War II were Brooks and Barney forced to live together, in Italy, enduring rations and “each other’s intransigent personalities: Romaine’s daunting egocentricity, Natalie’s compulsive sociability” (169). Their enforced intimacy lasted six years and proved stressful for both. By 1940 Barney was sixty-four and had a number of health problems including a weak heart. Souhami unsympathetically describes Brooks, then sixty-two, as having become “most peculiar: hypochondriacal, paranoid and disdainful. She imagined she was going blind and hoarded trunks of medicines out of fear of wartime shortages” (169). The painter, writes Souhami, “believed in a master race of Aryans” and “admired Mussolini’s force and statuesque figure and liked the displays of fascisti” (170). Barney disliked the inconvenience of war, its disruption of the busy life she was used to enjoying with her friends. They were shocked to learn of the bombing of Siena and Tivoli and of the cathedral and old library in Rouen” (173-74).⁷ Lamentably, Souhami only chooses to concentrate on Romaine’s irritability and Natalie’s discomfort. To her credit, she does give some idea of what the two women endured during their confinement in Italy. The issue of their Fascist sympathies requires a closer examination in the context of the times to be fully understood.

For the “wild girls” the end of the war marked the end of a golden age in Paris and of their way of life. The Paris of artists and free thinkers, eccentrics and monsters was gone. In 1946 Barney returned to Paris, where she tried to keep up with what was left of her circle and busied herself with making new friends and keeping the work of her friends alive. With rationing and friends sick and dying, the old life was gone: “Those she loved belonged to a brighter time” (179). Brooks stayed on in Florence, desiring “to get back to my painting and painter’s life” (178), and keeping a low profile because of her support for Fascism. This marked a period of gradual decline for both women.

In chapter 28 Souhami describes Barney’s continued devotion to Brooks, acting as mother protector and advisor, while the painter continued her spiraling

retreat into her private struggle with ghosts of the past. Even at the age of eighty, Barney began a new (and final) affair, with Madame Lahovary, whom she met on a park bench in Nice while visiting Brooks. Still distant and again wounded, Brooks realized that she and Barney would never spend their last years alone together.

Chapter 30, “The Last Lap,” describes the final years, including Barney’s attempts to secure Brooks’s reputation as a painter by placing her work in various collections. She even arranged for Adelyn Breeskin, Curator of Contemporary Art at the Smithsonian Institution, to visit Brooks in the spring of 1968, to discuss an exhibition and catalogue. During the last year of her life, Brooks refused all communications with Barney, returning letters unopened. Souhami leaves us with a picture of Romaine dying alone (like her mother) with her ghosts, in a darkened room, on December 7, 1970. Characteristically, the artist provided her own epitaph: “Here remains Romaine, who Romaine remains” (198). Barney lost her lease on 20 rue Jacob, and moved into a suite of rooms at the Hotel Meurice, where she died on February 1, 1972. She was buried holding a picture of Brooks.

Wild Girls is a problematic book. At times, the author’s interest in glamour, wealth, and even basic bodily functions at the expense of more interesting analysis and subject matter is bewildering. (Not everyone enjoys reading, “Liane de Pougy began each day with an enema” [7].) It is a personality driven book, but with so many “discursions”—tête-à-têtes with herself—and gossip about the “girls,” the author fails to draw the line between critical thinking and clever repartee; the crossover attempt does not work. Still, despite its smoldering and sometimes dewy, soft-focused prose, it is worth reading. As mentioned, the account is often breezy and condensed and the citations are incomplete. Souhami also could have used a better fact checker (for example, on page 53 she states that, “Her [Natalie’s] new house, at 20 rue Jacob, was to be her home until she died,” though on page 198 the house is lost). Some readers will be disappointed by the scant attention to and lack of analysis

of Brooks's painting and creative work. For me, the greatest letdown was that Souhami failed to realize that Brooks actually fashioned the picture of herself that has determined popular and scholarly treatments since her death.

From the very beginning their contrasting temperaments gave the Barney-Brooks relationship its dynamism. What united them were their common interests in classical, highbrow, and modern cultural events, political opinions, and women's rights. The balance of power is seen shifting from one partner to the other and back again, against an unbroken background of affection and passionate sexual connection that lasted until Brooks cut herself off from everything that had formerly nourished her.

Souhami's attempt to bring the lives of these two fascinating women to a wider audience is not totally successful. Still, at its best, *Wild Girls* gives a vivid,

richly hued picture of cosmopolitan society and lesbian lives between the wars and beyond. •

Cassandra Langer is an art historian/critic/appraiser who has published widely and is now working on a book about Romaine Brooks's art and life.

NOTES

1. To grasp Brooks's state of mind during this period of her life, one has to read elsewhere, see Meryle Secrest's early biography, *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks* (New York: Doubleday & Co. 1974); and Françoise Werner, *Romaine Brooks* (Paris: Plon, 1990). Written in French, the latter seems to draw heavily upon the former.
2. Giuditta Villa, "D'Annunzio a Romaine Brooks: otto letter inedite." *Micromegas* (anno XII-nn 1-2, n.s. gennaio-agosto 1985), 147-65; Werner, *Romaine Brooks*, 189-93.
3. What Brooks actually wrote in her memoir was, "I had never found a real woman friend before and Natalie brought me a wealth of

friendship which I gratefully accepted and fully returned." Romaine Brooks, "No Pleasant Memories," unpublished, undated manuscript, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 279.

4. For further study see the Barney/Brooks Letters, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, Research Collection. See also Secrest, *Between Me and Life*, 10; and Werner, *Romaine Brooks*, 223-39.
5. Secrest, *Between Me and Life*, 173; see also "No Pleasant Memories," n.p.
6. Brooks to Barney, letter dated Feb. 16, 1931, McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa.
7. The late Charles Henri Ford, whom I interviewed before his death at the age of 94, told me that neither Natalie nor Romaine had a deep interest in politics. When Brooks was in New York in the 1930s he and his lover, the painter Pavel Tchelitchew, regularly went for long rides with her through Central Park and elsewhere. He never recalls their discussing politics. He claimed neither woman had any real understanding of them.

My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator

by Katharine Kuh, edited and completed by Avis Berman. Arcade, 2006.

Reviewed by Karen A. Bearor

My life has been a long vista dominated by the fecundity of art, and I was privileged to be the friend of several artists who are now a part of history. They are all dead now, and I feel impelled to record various personal experiences and encounters. These memories, I hope, will help humanize these outstanding men and contribute to a fuller understanding of their achievements (1).

Thus Katharine Kuh (1904-1994) opens her memoir, *My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator*, and this passage

perfectly encapsulates her purpose. With a breezy prose and the promise of secrets revealed, she enlists the reader as a watercooler confidant, providing tantalizing tidbits about her life as an art dealer, curator, critic, and consultant and vivid vignettes of her interactions with selected men—each a celebrated figure in the arts.

Kuh began writing her memoirs at the age of 87, while housebound due to the degenerative effects of post-polio syndrome.¹ She died two years later, with only three quarters of the manuscript written. She asked art historian Avis Berman, her friend and literary executor, to complete the memoir should she not be able to do so. Hence, Berman wrote extended portions of the volume, relying on letters, publications, scrapbooks, and the 300-page transcript of her 15-session interviews with Kuh for the Archives of American Art oral history project in 1982-1983, with her own knowledge, research, and recollections. She added, cut, and shuffled content to shape and

polish the manuscript for publication, always trying to remain true to Kuh's intentions, while also adhering to her own primary criterion that "it had to stand as Katharine's writing, expressed in the first-person point of view" (x). Thus, distinguishing between what Kuh wrote and what Berman added is impossible; scholars seeking primary documentation of Kuh's life should still consult archival resources. The art enthusiast is the targeted reader for this volume.

Because Kuh was reluctant to talk about her early years, Berman added biographical information in her preface. Kuh was born Katharine Woolf, the youngest daughter of Morris and Olga Woolf. Her London-born father, a prosperous silk importer, who also collected prints (presented by Olga Woolf to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1941), moved his family from St. Louis to Chicago in 1909. Five years later, while the family was traveling in Europe, Katharine contracted polio. One of her earliest memories of her illness was

being propped up at the window of the family's hotel room in Paris that September, listening to the distant guns of the Battle of the Marne, and watching wounded soldiers transported into the city in taxis. She wore a plaster body cast for the next ten years, to support her crooked spine. Schooled at home, she regained the ability to walk during her teens, but her left leg never properly developed. With her mother, she traveled regularly to Boston for appointments with a polio specialist, and on one occasion, while she awaited the doctor, a wheelchair-bound man asked if she would pick up his dropped newspaper. Her body cast prevented her from doing so. Only later did she realize that he was the future president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

At age 15, Kuh reentered public schools, and upon graduating from high school she entered Vassar College in 1921 as an economics major. A course on Italian Renaissance art taught by a young Alfred H. Barr, Jr., however, changed her life. His electrifying lectures so inspired her that she changed her major to art history, and, according to Berman, she retrospectively regarded Barr "as the person who most acutely changed attitudes toward twentieth-century art, toward museums and their practices, and, above all else, toward the meaning of the word *art* itself" (xvii). From Vassar she went on to earn an M.A. in art history at the University of Chicago; her thesis concerned the American painter George Inness.² She moved to New York in 1929 to continue her studies at New York University but returned to Chicago the next year to marry George Kuh, a widower several years her senior and the chief operating officer of a large clothing firm. After five years, overwhelmed in part by her responsibilities in being stepmother to George's troubled son, she left her "stultifying existence on the North Shore, where my in-laws made fun of what I cared about and I was a complete failure at being domestic" (3). Her divorce was final a few months after the November 1935 opening of the Katharine Kuh Gallery at 540 North Michigan Avenue.

Her gallery, the only private gallery of its day in Chicago devoted to promoting

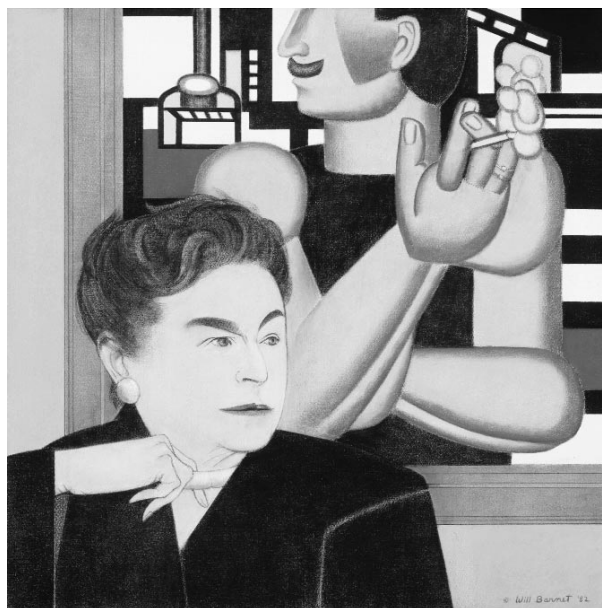


Fig. 1. Will Barnett, *Homage to Léger with K.K. (Katharine Kuh)* (1982), oil on canvas, 42" x 42". ©Will Barnett/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY/The Art Institute of Chicago.

vanguard modernism,³ survived by force of her personality and dedication, as Kuh never had any financial backing. She supplemented the meager income from sales by teaching art history classes and running an employment bureau for artists. She aroused the ire of conservatives, however, in showing work by Alexander Archipenko, László Moholy-Nagy, Fernand Léger, Stuart Davis, Isamu Noguchi, Paul Klee, Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, and Josef Albers, among dozens of others. Vigilante members of the Sanity in Art movement, spurred on by the writings of Eleanor Jewett, art critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, targeted Kuh's gallery for their derision and once smashed the gallery's window to show disapproval of the Joan Miró exhibition on view. Nevertheless, Kuh was able to provide a locus for modernism in a resistant Chicago until April 1942, when, no longer able to communicate with European artists because of the war, she closed the gallery.

She began her long association with the Art Institute of Chicago (AIC) in 1943, when Daniel Catton Rich hired her to substitute in the public relations department for a man called away for military service. Two years later, she became the curator of the museum's Gallery of Art

Interpretation and editor of the *AIC Bulletin*. She rose quickly in the ranks, from an associate curator of painting (1953) to curator of modern painting and sculpture (1954), to curator of modern art (1955).⁴ She left AIC in 1959, a year after Rich's departure for Massachusetts to take over the directorship of the Worcester Art Museum.

Although Kuh says nothing about her intimate relationships, Berman lets the reader know that, among Kuh's many affairs, the one with the married Rich was the most important, lasting from the late 1940s until his death in 1976. Yet, his name appears infrequently in the memoir. Typical of the anecdotal information she provides about the politics of acquiring art for the AIC, however, is her story about an informal talk he presented to the Society for Contemporary Art, a group affiliated with the museum. Rich mentioned his preference for Picasso's paintings over Braque's, and this comment offended Leigh Block, an AIC trustee, who was also a prolific collector and proud possessor of several important works by Braque. So offended was Block that he left only a few pieces of his collection to the museum, rather than the whole, or even the heart of it.

This anecdote occasions a particularly barbed statement about collectors:

There are collectors and there are people who buy art. Quantity does not necessarily make a collection. Overall quality is mandatory and so also is an overall plan that precludes as well as includes.... In my opinion, the Blocks were not sufficiently disciplined or knowledgeable to become authentic collectors (28).

Although not generally so harsh, such opinions on aspects of curatorship and the people she met in carrying them out are sprinkled throughout the text. For instance, in "Searching and Seeing," the free-flowing first chapter, where Kuh talks about art history, its study and its themes, she tells of her own fallibility when it came to authenticating two Picasso drawings. Thinking they lacked his quality, she sent photographs of the drawings to the artist. She was surprised when he affirmed their attribution, and from this lesson she concluded:

We can only guess how many third-rate works are incorrectly dubbed fakes! The problem with authentication is that it has always been too dependent on qualitative judgments. We are unwilling to believe that a great artist might have a bad day. How humble I felt after receiving those photographs back from the artist! (50)

While Kuh may occasionally relate such humbling experiences, she does not dwell on career disappointments. For example, the AIC was in charge of the American pavilion for the 28th Venice Biennale in 1956, and Kuh organized the exhibition. As Berman relates,

Traditionally, the person who assembles the exhibition for the American pavilion is the U.S. Commissioner to the Biennale and the one who helps determine which artists will receive its coveted prizes. Katharine took it for granted that she would be commissioner. No woman commissioner had ever represented the United States to date,

and the government authorities were not ready to break with tradition (xxii-xxiv).

Daniel Catton Rich received the appointment instead.

What does Kuh recall for the reader about the Biennale? She says nothing of any disappointment regarding the decision. Instead she talks about how she wanted to include Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline in the show, though their paintings had little to do with the theme, "American Artists Paint the City." So, in visiting the artists' studios and selecting the works for the exhibition, she arbitrarily named the paintings to suit the theme. De Kooning and Kline raised little objection, although Pollock was "disgusted" by the process (233).

Kuh did challenge salary inequities based upon gender at the AIC (xxiii), but Berman is quick to point out that she was not a feminist. Despite her friendship with and support of many women artists, Kuh "perpetuated sexual stereotyping" in her writing, and her sometimes "patronizing classifications" of them "would never have been countenanced if they had been applied to the men." According to Berman, "The primary battle as Katharine saw it was to get pioneering and often unpopular art accepted and vindicated, whether it was made by a woman or not. And usually, in her view, it was not" (xxv).

This opinion likely explains why none of the people who are the focus of separate chapters in the book—Mies van der Rohe, Vincent Willem van Gogh (Vincent van Gogh's nephew), Fernand Léger, Stuart Davis, Constantin Brancusi, Bernard Berenson, Mark Rothko, Alfred Jensen, Clyfford Still, Isamu Noguchi, Mark Tobey, Franz Kline, Jacques Lipchitz, Hans Hofmann, Josef Albers, and Edward Hopper—are women. Eight of these men had been the subjects of interviews published in Kuh's *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Modern Artists*, first published in 1962, where she did include Georgia O'Keeffe. But even O'Keeffe could not make the cut here.

Nevertheless, many will find the chapters on these famous men interesting.

There is gossip information about the artists' womanizing, their feuds, their parties, their inner demons, and so forth. Kuh is at her best when she describes their studios and working habits—the antiseptic cleanness of Albers' workspace, the rooftop route that Kline and De Kooning used to visit each other, Hopper's obsession with spaces located atop high flights of stairs (up which Kuh had to pull herself with much difficulty) and his studio sparsely furnished with a couple of armless straight-backed chairs and an easel, or the Cape Cod house that functioned as an extension of Hofmann's paintings and ebullient personality. She believed that nothing could substitute for the experience of seeing an artist's paintings in his or her studio (xi). Thus she paints as vivid a picture of the spaces as of the paintings within them.

In addition, Kuh provides details about the artists' mannerisms that breathe life into our mental images of them. For instance, Hans Hofmann, who spoke with a heavy German accent, used the contraction *nicha* (*nicht wahr?*) to such an extent that it "was like a nervous tic that punctuated everything he said" (251). Her account of his ecstasy at being able to hear the waves pounding the beach at Provincetown again with the aid of a sensitive new hearing aid is touching (254), while her report that he took at least an hour to decide where to sign his paintings, his signature being integral to his compositions, will fascinate many art students (255). Fortunately, Kuh's writing is vividly imagistic, as the sixty-four grainy black and white photographs of herself, her family, friends, and selected works of art sprinkled throughout this 300-page volume do little to enhance the text.

In *The Artist's Voice*, Kuh desired to provide a candid view of the disparate means by which artists sought similar goals. She wanted to humanize established artists, to "debunk" the myths that surrounded them and froze their reputations. A quarter of a century later, her goals in her memoirs were much the same, only now her friends had passed on. Of them, she wrote: "I found no stereotypes and, in turn, sought veracity. I agree with Voltaire that 'to the dead one owes only the

truth” (39). The romanticism that infuses her prose sounds dated today, as do her sentiments that the patient and educated eye will be able to locate, in all the noise created by innumerable “shallow exhibitionists,” the “authentic” voice, “to distinguish between authentic invention and the meretricious” (25-26). Kuh recognized that the world she helped to create and reinforce through her writings and her professional activities no longer existed. The most telling moment occurs in her chapter on Bernard Berenson, where she writes,

I’ve always been sad that this man who responded so profoundly to art of the past was unable to participate in his own world. Now that I’m approaching ninety myself, I stop to question why I find the art of the first half of our century so much more exciting than that of the last half. But in the end, no matter how bleary my eyes, I stand by this judgment (137-38).

Neither Kuh nor Berman recount much about Kuh’s professional activities after she resigned from the AIC. She spent nineteen years as an art critic for the *Saturday Review*, and she was the art consultant for the First National Bank of Chicago from 1968 through 1978, assembling for it one of the finest corporate collections of the

era. In addition, she wrote or contributed to countless books, catalogues, and articles. Many of her travels to visit artists, providing so many of the anecdotes for her memoirs, were a function of these activities. Yet, *My Love Affair with Modern Art: Behind the Scenes with a Legendary Curator* freezes Kuh in a mythic past of her own construction; the “debunking” she sought for the artists she favored and promoted she could not provide for herself. Berman’s preface ameliorates the problem a bit, but her desire to write for/as her friend and mentor does not allow her sufficient distance to tell us more about her own recollections of Kuh and to fill in the gaps in our knowledge of her.

What is still needed is a critical biography of Kuh, where the distinctions between subject and object are not so blurred. As it is, the reader truly does not know how much of the memoir is Kuh’s construction and how much is Berman’s. But for those who care little about such matters, the book is an engaging romp through the middle years of the twentieth century. •

Karen A. Bearor is an associate professor of art history at Florida State University. She is writing a book on the impact of progressive education on the development of modernism during the first half of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Post-polio syndrome (PPS) affects polio survivors years after their recovery from the initial acute onset of the illness. Symptoms of the condition include progressive muscle weakness, fatigue, pain from joint degeneration, and increasing skeletal deformities. According to Avis Berman, Kuh suffered from PPS her last three to four years, and she experienced debilitating muscle weakness and aching, with progressive contraction of her skeleton, making walking and even sitting upright more difficult (xxv).
2. Avis Berman, “Before the Art Institute of Chicago: Katharine Kuh’s Early Career and American Art,” *Magazine Antiques* 168, no. 5 (November 2005): 156.
3. Avis Berman, “The Katharine Kuh Gallery: An Informal Portrait,” in *The Old Guard and the Avant-Garde: Modernism in Chicago, 1910-1940*, ed. Sue Ann Prince (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 155.
4. Because of the nature of Kuh’s memoirs, dates and titles of positions are difficult to pin down. For these titles, please see the AIC Museum News Releases, indexed by year, and available at <http://www.artic.edu/aic/libraries/musarchives/pr/>.

Tina Modotti & Edward Weston: The Mexico Years

Sarah M. Lowe.
Merrell, 2004.

Tina Modotti

Margaret Hooks.
Phaidon, 2005.

Reviewed by Robin Rice

Tina Modotti’s career as a photographer lasted six or seven years depending on how it is calculated, but in Mexico, where she did most of her work, she exercised an influence that still

endures. In the United States, she has sometimes been dismissed as a talented student of the quintessential modernist photographer Edward Weston. Today, however, Modotti’s work is widely admired for its amalgamation of a powerful abstract vision with profoundly humanistic values. Sarah M. Lowe’s 1995 retrospective of Modotti at the Philadelphia Museum of Art¹ was a key factor in the growing recognition of this significant and fascinating twentieth-century artist. In 2004 Lowe published a biography of Weston. It seems appropriate that Lowe would then bring the two colleagues and lovers in life together in an exhibition. She organized

it for London’s Barbican Art Gallery.

In her extended catalogue essay for the Barbican show, Lowe avoids repeating herself as she barely sketches in Modotti’s and Weston’s lives and careers before and after the 1920s, the decade in which they lived and worked together or exchanged work and critiques with one another by mail. The first years in Mexico were especially rich. Modotti became a successful professional photographer and Weston moved from a romantic pictorialism into the highly formal yet mysteriously animistic images for which he is best known. Although Lowe necessarily discusses politics, love affairs, and many

wide-ranging art matters, she is most concerned with the working relationship between the two artists and their individual dialogues with the culture, people and land of Mexico. Modotti and Weston changed Mexican photography and Mexico changed them decisively.

Born in Italy, Tina Modotti (1896–1942) met the brilliant, established photographer Edward Weston (1886–1958) in the artistic milieu of California. A former actress on stage and in silent films, she modeled for Weston in 1921, and, although both were married to others, they began an affair. Modotti's husband, a batik artist and painter, went to Mexico in 1922, seeking exhibition opportunities for himself and for Weston. There, he contracted smallpox and died a few days after Modotti arrived. In 1923, Weston and Modotti returned to Mexico together to live a life of freedom. At Weston's suggestion, they agreed that their relationship would not be monogamous. More importantly, they agreed that Weston would teach Modotti photography in return for her assistance in the studio. The process, using a large view camera, was elaborate and painstaking. "Both printed on platinum and palladium paper—imported from England—for their finished work. This paper required a contact print of a negative the same size as the final image, and placing the negative on top of the paper, both Modotti and Weston took their work outside and exposed the photosensitive paper in the sunlight" (19). In 1924, they hung their work together in a group exhibition, Modotti's first show

On their arrival in Mexico, Weston's photography and modernist aesthetic attracted interest. The couple joined a cosmopolitan artistic community, which included Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, David Alfaro Siqueiros, Jean Charlot and D.H. Lawrence. Weston and, later, Modotti made a number of striking portraits of acquaintances. Modotti made few photographs of Weston. Perhaps this choice reflected Weston's own anti-expressionist aesthetic philosophy or Modotti's lack of confidence in her newly acquired skills. Later, at a time when she



Fig. 1. Tina Modotti, Mexican Hat with Hammer and Sickle (1927), © Tina Modotti.

was earning money for commissioned portraits, she photographed Cuban Julio Antonio Mella (1928), perhaps her greatest love, with open admiration for his strength and beauty. Her best-known picture of Weston toting a camera with amusing self-importance is neither flattering nor an accurate character study but, rather, a shared joke. Weston, in contrast, frequently used Modotti both as a nude model for abstract figure studies and as a portrait subject. His 1924 sequence, *Tina Reciting*, in which anguish and tenderness suffuse Modotti's face, a pale shape isolated by shadows, is one of his most affecting.

During the period of their association, Modotti and Weston struggled individually with questions regarding the photographer's mission. In 1927, Modotti, whose family had a history of socialist politics, joined the Communist Party. Weston believed that photography should never serve a cause and that the photographer should dedicate what he called his "entirely impersonal" work solely to art (28).

Modotti agreed in theory. Yet, she believed in social action as much as she believed in perfect prints. Eventually, it became impossible to have both. Lowe says, "[E]ven when she gave up photography in 1930, it was because she could not keep up the commitment to quality that she and Weston valued" (28). After Weston's return to California in 1924, he discovered in the cool porcelain convolu-

tions of a toilet the same beauty he found in the nude, writing "[H]ere was every sensuousness of the 'human form divine' but minus the imperfections" (28). The photographs do have a beauty, but one knows with certainty that the woman who photographed lush roses, fat nursing babies, and the hands of toiling peasants would never have become aesthetically enamored of a toilet. Weston, for his part, would never have composed Modotti's elegant iconic 1927 still lifes of bandoliers, guitars, sickles, and sombreros (Fig. 1), symbolizing Mexican Communism.

Often Weston's and Modotti's best work seems to have its genesis in their unique but equally irresolvable inner struggles relating to photography's proper role as an art form. Lowe believes that "Weston finessed himself around the idea of personal expression by substituting the notion of emotional response" (37). In 1927, when Weston photographed shells in ways which Lowe describes as "Modern in the fact of their having been overtly arranged and removed from any 'natural context,'" Modotti, who received the prints by mail, responded with overflowing admiration and a subtle analysis: "There's something so pure and at the same time so perverse about [the shell pictures]—they contain both the innocence of natural things and the morbidity of a sophisticated distorted mind" (38).

Modotti "rededicated herself to photography" in 1926, but, like much of her subsequent work, *Workers Parade*, taken on May Day of that year effectively expresses a double vision, as it records with equal power the compelling political force of labor and the abstract patterning of workers' sombreros. Lowe aptly describes Modotti's pictures of workers, such as the undated *Untitled (Four Women Doing Laundry)* or *Untitled (Feet in Sandals)*, as "visceral and intellectual at once, telling a quick story about the lives of the peasants" (30).

In 1926 Weston returned to Mexico to execute a commission to illustrate a book on Mexican decorative art. He traveled through the country with his fourteen-year-old son Brett (who began his own career as a photographer at this time) and

Modotti as his assistant and translator. Though many fine photographs resulted from this trip, Weston's and Modotti's romantic association was ending. Lowe draws from Weston's *Daybooks* entries recording his bitterness. "The leaving of Mexico will be remembered for the leaving of Tina," Weston wrote on the train. Their paths diverged here. Weston went on to pursue art for art's sake, while Modotti continued to merge her desire to make art with her need for political action" (30).

The two artists continued to correspond and to exchange prints (Modotti's dissemination of her photographs of murals was crucial in publicizing the Mexican mural movement). "Their genuine friendship and mutual regard is evident throughout, and about a year after his departure, Modotti writes movingly of her gratitude to Weston for his 'vital guidance and influence that initiated me in this work that is not only a means of livelihood [sic (in Lowe's text)] but a work that I have come to love with real passion and that offers such possibilities of expression" (32-33).

Because of her unswerving commitment to Communism, Modotti's life from this point is fraught with pain, danger, and uncertainty. Her lover Mella was shot and killed as the two walked together on the street. Arrested on false charges, she was released but deported in 1929 at the same time she had her first solo show in Mexico. In Berlin, she was frustrated by advancing technology. The skills she had learned were not applicable to "a country now devoted to hand-held 35mm cameras" (35). After a peripatetic decade in Germany, Moscow, and Spain with the unsavory Italian Communist Vittorio Vidali, a liaison which endured perhaps because the two worked together for the party, both returned to Mexico. Modotti was considering a return to photography around the time of her sudden and mysterious death in a taxi in 1942. Though there is no compelling evidence, Vidali has been suspected of arranging her murder.

Meanwhile, Weston moved toward increasingly abstracted, patterned photography based on natural objects and co-founded an informal group of 'pure' photographers, exhibiting in 1932 as Group f/64. "Weston acknowledged

that Mexico had been crucially important for his maturity as an artist" (40). "[W]hether or not he could admit it, Modotti was perhaps the most important artist he associated with in Mexico despite the fact that she was just beginning to find her eye. In her Weston found a photographic comrade, an artist who forged with him a Modernist aesthetic in Mexico" (39).

Lowe ends her detailed examination of both artists in 1931, around the time Modotti gave up photography. Though she illustrates Modotti's legacy in the work of two Mexican photographers, Manuel Alvarez Bravo and Mariana Yampolsky, she does not take such pains with Weston (though several of his son Brett's photographs from the 1920s are included), perhaps because Weston's influence on the history of photography is already well documented.

The reader who wishes to obtain a fuller sense of the lives of these artists might turn to Lowe's earlier Modotti catalogue and to numerous well-researched books on Weston, including his own *The Daybooks of Edward Weston*, available in several editions.² The Barbican catalogue is fully illustrated with many excellent reproductions of the artists' work, and includes a satisfying number of portraits of both (but more and better of Modotti).

Margaret Hooks's *Tina Modotti* is less ambitious than Lowe's 1995 catalogue, but it will be just right (and more available) for many readers. The squarish shape of the book and its slightly flexible cover are pleasant to handle. For scholars, though, it does not have a bibliography, index, or footnotes. Hooks's short biographical introduction is accurate, readable, and incorporates evocative details. For example, she reminds us that Modotti and Frida Kahlo are represented together in Rivera's mural, *The Arsenal*, and writes about their friendship. Modotti persuaded the younger Kahlo to join a Communist youth organization and gave her a pin with a Communist emblem. "Modotti also encouraged her to dress more soberly, and for a short while Kahlo wore a simple skirt and blouse—a style that was Modotti's hallmark when the fashion

among her friends was for exotic indigenous clothing" (introduction, n.p.).

The original prints of the photographs in the Phaidon book often seem superior to those in the Barbican show catalogue, although information about Phaidon lenders is not specific. It is intriguing to compare images. *Woman with Flag* (1928), which Hooks identifies as "one of Modotti's few staged photographs," must have its origin in different prints. The version in Hooks's book is lighter, allowing more detail, crisper, and slightly more vertical. Hooks points out that though the unidentified model appears to be dressed as "a poor indigenous" woman, "her highly polished 'city' shoes and silk stockings belie her created identity" (35).

In general the photographs in Hooks's book have sharper details and a greater range of values, perhaps, in part, because they are printed on glazed paper. *Mella's Typewriter* (1928), which seems more symbolic than visually exciting in the Barbican catalogue, pops into lively focus when the scrunched edges of used typewriter ribbon are visible and the actual typing on the page is more visible. The photograph was intended to be "a psychological portrait" of Mella who "considered his typewriter a symbolic weapon, integral to the fight for liberation" (33).

Not all of the Hooks images are superior. Modotti's portrait of Mella in the Phaidon book is fuzzy and bleached compared to the wonderfully subtle print in Lowe's catalogue. And it is tightly cropped to emphasize Mella's profile; we can't see the shape of the head, neck and shoulders, all part of the Barbican version. But the Hooks soft-focus may be more intimate and sensual. This photograph (but which print?), Hooks tells us, became a popular image of the martyred revolutionary hero (37).

Hooks's detailed captions for individual photographs enhance the pleasure of her book through the additional level of accessible commentary. She is more willing than Lowe (in the Barbican catalogue) to engage with Modotti's Communist politics, and the captions allow her to analyze individual pictures in detail.

Hooks concludes that one key to Modotti's abandonment of photography

"lies in the Soviet Union of 1931. ...Modotti would have had to produce only 'revolutionary' art, or face the consequences. She was too much of an artist to see her photography reduced to mere propaganda and at the same time too devoted to the Party to risk disapproval or expulsion" (introduction, n.p.).

Both books are useful additions to the literature on Tina Modotti, and Lowe's

adds in a significant way to our understanding of Weston. Hooks is able to include more of Modotti's photographs, while Lowe offers the complex experience of comparing the work of two pioneers of twentieth century photography. •

Robin Rice, an artist and critic, teaches at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia and is a frequent contributor to *WAJ*.

NOTES

1. See Sarah M. Lowe, *Tina Modotti: Photographs* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).
2. See, for example: Edward Weston, *The Daybooks of Edward Weston, California*, Nancy Newhall, ed. (New York: Horizon Press, 1961).

Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994

Edited by Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmähmann
Ashgate, 2005.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Rankin

Collections of essays by different authors have become a favored way of putting together thematic books, drawing on a range of knowledge and expertise and, in postmodern fashion, representing diverse points of view. For those working on women's art who have particular reason to espouse a non-monolithic reading of history, this multiple approach seems particularly desirable. For the reviewer, however, it presents a complex challenge, as a generalized critique may be misleading when contributions vary considerably in theory and content, as they do in *Between Union and Liberation: Women Artists in South Africa 1910-1994*.

The history of South African women artists has been rich yet not deeply mined, which makes this a welcome addition to the literature: it also means that topic selection must have been a difficult task. It would have seemed easier in an earlier era when white painters (with perhaps a few sculptors) would have been considered the only ones to qualify for a book on art. Choices in a postmodern, postapartheid South Africa, and in the wake of feminist rethinking of art history, are far more complicated. The editors, Marion Arnold and Brenda Schmähmann, have not

succumbed to the temptation of assembling many short contributions to traverse as much territory as possible. Yet they have clearly made it a goal to cover a range of art production in the ten essays that make up this publication of some 230 pages, and to achieve balance in their choices.

Setting aside Arnold's succinct historical introduction, which contextualizes other contributions and offers further glimpses of the rich variety of South African women's art, and Jillian Carman's account of Florence Phillips and the founding of the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which sets the art scene for early twentieth-century South Africa at the time of Union, there are, broadly speaking, four essays on white and four on black women artists. There is also even-handed distribution between so-called 'fine arts' and 'crafts': if painting seems to dominate with three essays, one of those includes sculpture, and other essays introduce a wide range of media—photography, tapestry, basket-making, ceramics, and embroidery. This seems apt for a book focusing on women, particularly for black women whose production has less often been in areas promoted by formal art training, such as painting and sculpture. But the editors have been careful not to create a stereotypical ethnic divide that corresponds too closely to an art-craft division. To look at their selection another way, the essays address one black and three white painters, a black sculptor, a white photographer, white women tapestry makers, black embroiderers and basket-weavers, and both black and white ceramists. The word judicious as

well as wide-ranging springs to mind in characterizing the volume.

It might be asked, though, whether such racial and media balance has been achieved at the expense of a more accurate reflection of the period, taking into account the strong role played by white women artists, particularly painters, in South Africa, despite a dominantly patriarchal society. But many of those figures have had considerable attention in the past, while other fields and artists given attention here have been sorely neglected. And Arnold's earlier book, *Women and Art in South Africa* (1996),¹ has already offered a more comprehensive coverage, recognizing the predominance of white women practitioners (54 of the 61 short biographies she includes refer to white artists).

From another perspective related to white dominance, it seems unfortunate that the authorial voices all belong to white women. The editors acknowledge this as a reflection of the state of art history in South Africa, where so few black women have yet had the opportunity—or, Arnold suggests, the inclination—to take up academic training in the field. While tokenism is obviously to be avoided, collaborative writing might have been a strategy to compensate for absence of experience if it was not possible to find independent black voices to include among the eight contributors (the editors wrote two essays apiece). Those voices have been included in another way, however—in interviews with black women cited by a number of writers who have been at pains to draw information directly from the artists they are discussing. While it

might be argued that this does little to change hierarchical relationships, it does make for greater inclusivity.

When dealing with the apartheid era in South Africa, equity in writing on art is impossible to achieve. The differences defined by racial divides run too deep. Thus balance in the sharing out of essay topics is somewhat undermined by the different treatment demanded by material about black and white artists. While essays on white women focus chiefly on recognized individuals, those on black art production deal predominantly with groups, even though some artists are named, countering the invisibility of such women in the past. In these contributions on black artists—and in Jacqueline Nolte's essay that addresses Mabasa and Sebisi as individuals—there is a far greater emphasis on social context and personal circumstances than is the case when white women are discussed. This is not merely a disparity in the approaches of different authors, but may also be found in a comparison of the two essays contributed by Brenda Schmahmann.

Schmahmann addresses the very different worlds of an academically trained and internationally recognized white artist, Penny Siopis (b. 1953), and black women's embroidery collectives. Their differences are acknowledged not only in the nature of the art they produce and the levels of success they enjoy, but in the way she writes about them. Fittingly, Siopis's art is engaged through sophisticated concepts of feminist writing, with a close reading of her paintings, pastels and collages of the 1980s as a response to the situation of women in general and South African women in particular. While Siopis's images do not focus on white women alone, her consideration of the position of black women is necessarily at some remove, achieved through historical images and texts, a process in itself an implicit indicator of her privilege as a white woman. The debates here, by both artist and art historian, are aesthetic and intellectual. In contrast, Schmahmann's other essay on four groups of black embroiderers, of Xihoko, Chiviraka, Kaross Workers and Mapula, while it discusses the distinctive styles and subjects of their appealing stitched

imagery, gives considerable attention to the women's life situations. Their personal relationships and social circumstances are perceived as seminal to their work, while the details of Siopis's life and relationships—other than her mothering of a son—are not mentioned.

It is a realistic differentiation, where the relative security of white existence ensured continuous creativity, while the relentless insecurity of black lives, which initially prompted artistic initiatives to counter economic vulnerability, could just as readily disrupt their fulfilment. The diverse approaches may also reflect Schmahmann's sense of comfort with discourses of art that are closest to her training as an art historian, and her own experience as a white South African woman. This did not mean that she gave less attention to the less familiar: on the contrary, her research here and elsewhere has done much to establish the significance of the textile art of black women. But it may have inculcated a sense of the need to compensate, to relate empathetically to the world of collectives and the painful life choices that black women face every day, and not to sideline these in favor of a disinterested analysis of the artworks. If it was one of her goals to differentiate these areas of art production, Schmahmann has done so admirably.

Similarly diverse approaches can be found in the contrast between the essays by Marion Arnold and Jacqueline Nolte, each comparing two artists, white in one case and black in the other. The first is a lucid discussion of modernism in the work of two painters, with reference to their personal circumstances only in so far as it affects their art. The second addresses the intricacies of two artists' lives as well as their art and becomes more than a little convoluted as it shifts between discussions of sculptor Noria Mabasa (b. 1938) and painter Mmakgabo Sebidi (b. 1943) as women as well as artists—complicated further by Nolte's identifying the need to account for both the African traditions and the apartheid conditions that shaped their lives.

Additional complexity results from the importance of considering the visionary origins which both Mabasa

and Sebidi claim for their art alongside more accustomed forms of inspiration, such as contacts with other artists and the art market (which tend to be underplayed here). Apart from the dangers of exoticization in an overemphasis on practices that are foreign to the conventional discourses of art history, these unusual influences are difficult to translate into Western terms to meet academe's expectation of logical consistency, leading to sometimes contradictory accounts. This no doubt explains, for example, Nolte's emphasis on Mabasa's dreams in which her father spoke, while in an interview I had with her in 1987, Mabasa talked of an old woman, perhaps her grandmother, who appeared in her dreams and urged her to make and sell her earliest clay figures, drawing on skills traditionally used by women. And, interviewed in the same year, Sebidi did not mention her dreams at all, perhaps lacking assurance at the time to talk of ideas that would be strange to a European interviewer, although she stressed the influence of her grandmother as opposed to that of other artists who had been important in introducing her to the contemporary art style in which she works. Subsequent recognition (a large complex carving by Mabasa selected for the Cape Town Triennial in 1987, for example, and Sebidi winning the Standard Bank Young Artist Award in 1989) has increased serious attention for the distinctive aspects of their art-making, and appreciation of the ability of both women to create compelling works in the face of social oppression.

Arnold, too, gives attention to women artists working against the odds—the painters Bertha Everard (1873-1965) and Irma Stern² (1894-1966)—but in this case it was aesthetic taste that created difficulties rather than social problems. It is interesting to consider why women like these were so prominent among South Africa's early modernists, although Arnold does perhaps accord them undue eminence because of the invisibility of male artists in her account. She only mentions (in a footnote) two men—the ultra conservative Gwelo Goodman and Edward Roworth—not, for example, the more adventurous Pieter Wenning (born



Fig. 1. Constance Stuart Larrabee, *Portrait of Ndebele Woman, South Africa* (c. 1936–49), Constance Stuart Larrabee Collection, Eliot Elisofon Photographic Archives, National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the same year as Everard) or Wolf Kibel (born nine years after Stern but dying in 1938, well before either woman). Arnold would no doubt say that it was her brief to write on women artists, but reference to male contemporaries would not have detracted from the contributions of Everard and Stern of which she writes so convincingly, and might have been enlightening, particularly in her discussion of the reception of their work by conservative South African audiences. While Everard's responsibilities as a woman seem to have contributed to her lack of success and ultimate abandonment of painting (though her daughters became painters), it is less clear whether Stern's gender operated for or against her energetic pursuit of early recognition as an expressionist artist in South Africa.

For Nessa Leibhammer, the role of men seemed so significant for an understanding of basket making in Kwa-Zulu Natal that her essay revisits at some length arguments about the gendering of production in historical Zulu-speaking communities. Her systematic account provides insights not only into basket weaving, but other practices as well, and particularly whether it was the medium or technique of a process that defined

male and female roles. On the basis of historical evidence, she is able to show that the ubiquitous application of the term 'traditional' to late-twentieth-century basket weaving is incongruous, for contemporary production is a new phenomenon, in style and function as well as in the domination of women as makers. Valuable though Leibhammer's contextualization is, the reader may feel a little disappointed that, because she needed to move outside the chronological limits set by the book for much of her essay, she could not expand further on what she has to say about the baskets themselves, the superb, large-scale objects, no longer intended for practical use, that constitute this renaissance of basket making.

When Liese van der Watt writes of the Voortrekker Monument tapestries, she too acknowledges the importance of context, in this case focusing on the status of women in Afrikaner culture. She is not concerned with the makers' personal lives, but with broader social attitudes that undervalued tapestries as an art form, in turn reinforcing attitudes that marginalized Afrikaner women—despite the invention of the *volksmoeder* ('mother of the nation') as an important figure in national myth-making. Their subservient position is also evident in the irony that a male artist was invited to design the tapestries. Moreover, the finished gros point works were not considered significant enough in the defining of Afrikaner nationalism to be installed in the main commemorative space of the monument, or for their unveiling to be part of the celebrations on the first Republic Day, 31 March 1961, even though they were completed early that year.

Yet the undervaluing of the tapestries, and by implication their makers, seems contradicted by the significant role women play in representations of similar subjects from Afrikaner pioneer history in the extensive marble friezes of the monument (as Van der Watt mentions)—and perhaps even more by the fact that

one of the three sculptors of the friezes was a woman, Laurika Postma, and that Anton van Wouw's enormous bronze mother and children was installed prominently at the monument's entrance (points the author does not refer to). These sculptures predate the tapestries by some years, however, perhaps suggesting nuanced changes in gender politics during the period. Van der Watt certainly alerts us to later changes when she opens her essay with Anton Kannemeyer's cheekily erotic image of a modern-day *volksmoeder*, demonstrating radically different attitudes found in recent Afrikaner art.

Wilma Cruise's essay gives attention to another art form that has been undervalued in South Africa—ceramics—particularly the production of women, and even more so rural women. Hers is the only essay that addresses black and white artists together—or perhaps one should say in parallel, in that she writes short narratives of four very different examples of women's ceramic production in KwaZulu-Natal. A good sense of continuity between them is achieved, however, not only because of the shared art form they discuss, but because of her ongoing discussion of interpersonal and intercultural exchanges—from well-intentioned but Eurocentric teaching at the Evangelical Lutheran Art and Craft Centre at Rorke's Drift; to independent developments among rural potters in the Nala family; to interactions of white women potters (Hilda Ditchburn, Juliet Armstrong and Fée Halsted-Berning), teaching and studying fine arts at the University of Natal; to the establishment by the latter of the Ardmore Ceramic Studio, which has supported innovative work by black ceramists such as sculptor Bonnie Ntshalintshali. As well as giving attention to broader themes, Cruise includes brief but lively descriptions of the diverse work of artists in each group, revealing her intimate understanding of ceramic processes (she is a ceramist herself), so that the reader engages with the artworks as well as the issues.

A balance of attention to works and issues also characterizes Brenda Danilowitz's essay on Constance Stuart Larrabee (1914–2000): it would have been

inappropriate indeed to underplay formal matters when they were at the heart of this photographer's oeuvre with its background in Bauhaus and Neue Sachlichkeit aesthetics. But while Danilowitz treats us to some fine-grained analysis of Larrabee's meticulously composed studies of Ndzundza Ndebele women in ceremonial dress (Fig. 1) and of their painted homesteads, she also addresses the subject matter, demonstrating that it was as surely controlled as the photographic organization. Shifting from an examination of individual works to their framing in ethnographic publications, and in the context of Larrabee's many other photographs of Ndebele bequeathed by her to the National Museum of African Art in Washington, Danilowitz reveals their performance of values current in South Africa in the 1930s and 1940s, an aspect suppressed by the photographer herself.

Larrabee's photographs are among the most compelling images in the book, advantaged by being in black-and-white. Given the limited number of color plates (presumably the publisher's decision), the editors understandably devoted them to pictorial forms deploying color, a category that happily includes Bonnie Ntshalintshali's *Last Supper* (Pl. 12) in polychrome ceramic, as well as one each for Everard, Stern, and embroiderers

Salphina Maluleke and Rossinah Maepa (the latter on the cover), and two each for Sebidi and Siopis. But a lack of any color illustrations for baskets, tapestries, ceramics, and Mabasa's sculptures reduces their vigor of facture and tactility and suggests that the heritage of old prejudices which informed art-craft hierarchies cannot entirely be shaken off. However unintentionally, the illustrations privilege pictorial forms. It might seem to echo attitudes in the time of Florence Phillips when she was unsuccessful in having craftwork included at the Johannesburg Art Gallery—indicating, as Carman ruefully acknowledges in her very readable account of Phillips's achievements and setbacks as founder of the gallery, that the power of even influential South African women was limited in a society controlled by male economic power. Phillips would no doubt have approved, though, that two of the pictorial forms included in color for the book were embroideries, however remote in style and production to her early twentieth-century appreciation of women's work.

Even if her role as patron makes Phillips the odd (wo)man out in this collection, her treatment as an individual study gives her shared status with the other white women. To generalize: in contrast to most of the discussions of

black artists, the writers on white artists seem to have felt no need to cover series of women and their circumstances, but have confidently selected individuals and focused on a close analysis of their art. To suggest this differentiation is not to detect a flaw in the writers or the editors of this book and the valuable material it offers. For South Africa's art of the past it can hardly be otherwise. Both the histories of women artists and the ways they are written about inevitably demonstrate not only how the shackles of apartheid affected art production, but how they also left indelible marks on its scholarship. •

Elizabeth Rankin is Professor of Art History at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. For many years a professor and dean at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, she pursued her research on South African art with a focus on cross-cultural issues, publishing particularly on the relatively neglected areas of sculpture and printmaking.

NOTES

1. For Brenda Schmähmann's and Marilyn Wyman's reviews, see *WAJ* (Fall/Winter 1998), 50-54.
2. See Marilyn Wyman's "Irma Stern: Envisioning the 'Exotic'" *WAJ* (Fall/Winter 1999), 18-23, 35.

Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland

by Katy Deepwell.
I.B.Tauris, 2005.

Reviewed by Patricia Briggs

A book with significance beyond its seemingly narrow scope, its title is paradoxically both accurate and misleading. *Dialogues: Women Artists from Ireland* presents interviews focused on the decade of the 1990s with sixteen contemporary artists—Orla Barry, Maud Cotter, Pauline Cummins, Rita Duffy, Frances Hegarty, Jaki Irvine, Sandra Johnston, Sharon Kelly, Mary McIntyre, Susan

MacWilliam, Alice Maher, Alanna O'Kelly, Catherine Owens, Vivienne Roche, Anne Tallentire, and Louise Walsh—but it does not offer an analysis that forces these artists into a monolithic category of "Irish female artist-ness." Instead of building an argument about Irish *Weltanschauung*, Deepwell's interviews present a plurality of perspectives and diversity in aesthetic approach nicely described by artist Anne Tallentire's characterization of her own work, "I don't want to endorse the stereotypical view of Irish identity, but [rather want to] open it up to its complexity and diversity and to an unfixed and problematised scrutiny" (175).

In its insistence on plurality, hetero-

geneity, and individual specificity *Dialogues* is consistent with Deepwell's challenge of feminist and modernist critical approaches which she believes often oversimplify and restrictively categorize the meaning of women's art.¹ By presenting in-depth interviews with contemporary women artists, Deepwell works to break out of these discursive frames, which she believes also often work to marginalize women artists. Additionally, like her journal *n.paradoxa*,² *Dialogues* seeks to illuminate the international character of contemporary women's artistic practice. The featured interviews not only represent artists and artistic practices that are at odds with romantic stereotypes of Irishness and

essentialist generalizations about women artists, but offer readers a view of a place that has been peripheral to feminist art criticism.

The interview format of *Dialogues* is one of the book's most intriguing features, and the way Deepwell deploys it constitutes an admirable "feminist strategic practice."³ One of Deepwell's ongoing concerns is that, although women's participation in the art world has increased since the 1970s, too often a lack of seriousness characterizes their treatment within the contemporary art world. To support this point, in her brief introduction, Deepwell points out that despite women's increased presence in art schools and galleries today, women artists in Ireland are offered a small percentage of the solo exhibitions which signify the highest level of professional achievement in the art world (4-5). Thus, both the length and the professional tone of the interviews in *Dialogues* are significant. Importantly, the voices of the artists rather than of the critic fill the pages of this book. Deepwell's inclusion of plentiful images (194 black-and-whites and 16 color plates) of most of the art works discussed in *Dialogues* models a level of professional consideration she believes women artists deserve.

The interview format is hardly unusual, but here the result is particularly satisfying. These are substantial interviews (ten to twelve pages apiece), covering the development of the artist's work during the 1990s. Knowledgeable about each artist's oeuvre, Deepwell fashions questions which effectively prompt thoughtful discussion, resulting in intimate dialogues that offer the reader the rare opportunity to listen in on critical conversations. A book of interviews challenges the modernist notion that a work of art should "speak for itself"; yet in privileging the artist's voice, *Dialogues* by no means propagates the problematic notion that the meaning of a work of art lies primarily in artist's intention. Instead, as Deepwell says, it is her hope that these interviews open up a "broader understanding of the artists and their works from their own account" and demonstrate that "cultural debate and art criticism have an important role to play in developing a dialogue around an

artwork" (6). Those interested in contemporary women's art would benefit by seeing this approach taken by more critics and writers.

In her introduction Deepwell sketches a picture of Ireland during the 1990s that we later glimpse through myriad details in the interviews, as artists describe their experiences living and working in Belfast and Dublin—the largest art centers in Ireland—as well as in places like Derry, Limerick, Galway, Sligo, and Cork. Ireland's unprecedented economic prosperity during the 1990s together with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which ended sectarian violence, led to a promotion of the arts throughout the nation during this period.

During the 1970s and 1980s, while new media, performance, and installation art were on the rise throughout Europe and the United States, at this time the Irish art scene was still dominated by traditional media, particularly neo-expressionistic painting. Not until the 1990s did the newer forms take hold in Ireland, with women artists playing an important role in promoting progressive trends. Deepwell is careful not to argue, however, as is sometimes the case, that women artists turn to performance, new media, and installation as a critique of more "masculinist" traditional media. Such an assertion, she believes, simplifies and skews the fact about women's full participation in the general turn toward conceptualism and new media during the last three decades (3).

The growth of public art programs in Ireland brought with it significant changes in the funding "infrastructure" for the arts, a trend Deepwell is keenly interested in tracking. Throughout *Dialogues* artists frequently relate their thoughts and experiences on this matter. For example, in her interview artist Vivienne Roche discusses her public commissions and comments on contemporary attitudes toward public art in Ireland:

[T]here's quite an openness to imaginative projects, very often from local authorities and amongst other commissioners of public projects....and what is interesting is that people are able to identify art

as a point of dialogue, and people realize that the dialogue is helpful in shaping communities. People's goals are shifting all the time and the traditional bases of communities are changing. Art can help shape the public realm (161-62).

Public art often involves artists inserting work into nontraditional spaces or creating work depicting nontraditional subjects for public spaces, and a number of the artists discuss the friction with audiences that sometimes results. For example, when Pauline Cummins's *Nine Months and After* (1984), featuring women in the early stages of labor was exhibited in a maternity hospital, some viewers objected to the presence of nudes. Louise Walsh relates her experience with the commissioned sculpture *Monument to the Unknown Woman Worker* (1992), which was eventually rejected after rumors circulated in the press suggested that prostitutes would appear in it. A number of artists discuss the way that commissions for public projects often result in artwork that is ephemeral or that emerges from collaboration with community members.

As the artists explain their processes and the issues that interest them, an unexpected picture of Ireland emerges for the reader. In *Dialogues* Ireland does not appear as a country with fixed boundaries but rather as a shifting nexus of geographical, historical, and temporal trajectories, which pulls places like Iceland, Kosovo, and Australia into its orbit. For artist Maud Cotter, its geographical proximity to Ireland helps explain the attraction of Iceland, where she found inspiration for her abstract sculptures that make reference to nature in profoundly sensuous terms. In her interview Cotter speaks of the importance of Iceland (as well as the busy streets of London) in the development of her phenomenological sensibility toward her materials and her surroundings. Parallels and correspondences between Ireland and a range of other countries emerge in the interviews. Irish history and the contemporary experience of living during the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland bring to mind locations like Kosovo, Zagreb, and Kurdistan for many

of the artists. Frances Hegarty's video/audio installation *Voice-Over* (1995), for example, features the artist's interviews with female victims of the war in Croatia, while Alanna O'Kelly speaks of the inspiration she drew from a television news report about a Kurdish refugee who had lost her child in the first Gulf War. In some works O'Kelly explores Irish history as a way of understanding and empathizing with the contemporary displaced Asian and African famine victims that she reads about in the newspaper. In *The Country Blooms, A Garden and A Grave* (1992), which concerns the Great Irish Famine of 1846 and 1848, O'Kelly employs images of mass graves where anonymous Irish victims of famine were buried. The complex historical ties that bind Ireland and Australia come into view in Hegarty's video/audio installation *Gold* (1993). Beginning in the late-eighteenth century the British forced the deportation of Irish prisoners (many of whom were advocates of "Irish Home Rule") to penal colonies in Australia. Later, at mid-century, when gold was discovered there, waves of Irish immigrated voluntarily—in search of economic prosperity—often displacing the Australian aboriginal people. Using images of the Australian landscape, in *Gold* Hegarty offers a post-colonial analysis of the Irish in Australia, where the Irish figure as neither heroes nor victims but rather inhabit the positions of both colonizer and colonized.

In a number of interviews the reader encounters artworks which defamiliarize aesthetic formulas of the Irish countryside and/or metaphorically re-map the country. Orla Barry's *Findlings* (1997-99) is a case in point. At first sight this series of portrait-like documentary photographs of rocks by the sea seems to represent a stark, romantic image of an Irish seascape. But this is not the case. Instead, here Barry has drawn together together poetic and phonic correspondences between words and their meanings to represent the land in a less familiar way. The word "findling," Barry indicates, is the German term for the stones "deposited by glaciers on the coast hundreds of thousands of years ago" (17). In this piece Barry exploits the similarity between the words "findling" (a discarded rock) and

"foundling" (a discarded infant), and the chance coincidence that the rocks shown rest on a beach named Bastardstown. Here, Barry abandons received paradigms for representing the Irish countryside and instead draws lines of historical and poetic convergence between the prehistoric movements of glaciers, stones that dot the shoreline, and words as arbitrary signifiers of meaning. Also re-envisioning Ireland is Anne Tallentire's *Altered Tracks* (1987 and 1997), a performance piece that investigates the political dimension of naming—specifically the use of English words to name Irish places. Using lines she traces from the palm of her hand Tallentire remaps the cartography of the Irish countryside; metaphorically placing herself in the land, in her performance she imagines new ways of inhabiting it (175-76).

Considerations of aesthetics, gender, and the Irish sociopolitical context come together in many of the interviews. Although Deepwell is careful not to load her interviews with questions concerning gender and the politics of representation, as a feminist critic she acknowledges that women's work as different from men's is one of her perennial interests: "My own curiosity leads me to try to understand how and why women artists produce the images they do and to consider the investments, the transformations and the processes involved in producing works which in form and content often differ markedly from the work of their male peers" (5). It is clear that many of the artists featured in the book share Deepwell's interest in these issues as well.

Accordingly, women's experiences of pregnancy, their reproductive rights, and motherhood surface as concerns for a number of artists. Pauline Cummings reminds us that these were "not acceptable subjects" for art in Ireland—a predominantly Catholic country—during the 1980s. Reacting against prevailing norms, Cummings explored her own and other women's experiences of pregnancy in her work of the period. Sharon Kelly shares her thoughts about *Lifting the Veil* (1992), a series of charcoal drawings produced while the artist mourned the "deaths of three baby



Fig. 1. Rita Duffy, *Dessert* (2001) chocolate and linen cloth, 35 3/4" x 18". Courtesy of the artist.

sons" (93). The dark and foreboding images of veiled women featured in this series are reminiscent of the hooded paramilitary fighters active in Northern Ireland at the time. Kelly explains that her grief became connected in her mind with the violence played out on the streets of Belfast: "There were countless atrocities, accompanied by displays of pain and grief on the television and radio in the very city where I was living... Our grief was thrown into relief against the grief of the others and society's grief" (96).

The politics of identity and the cultural construction of femininity are issues explored in several artists' interviews. Catherine Owens employs images of women's clothing in her work to challenge cultural perceptions of women. Her video installation entitled *Is this really me or should I go and change?* (1999), for example, features the flat silhouette of a paper doll's dress that becomes increasingly rich in texture and pattern as the piece progresses. "The impression given by this little paper doll cut-out is one thing," Owens says "but the reality is that, as the image changes, there are layers and layers of moving, complex stains" (152). Similarly, Mary McIntyre's surrealist-inspired series of photographs *The Great War Continues* (1993) and *The fallacy of trying to isolate one thing from another* (1994) investigates the "struggles between outer appearance and inner reality" for women (105). McIntyre is interested in both "metaphors" of femaleness and "how women are judged by their appearance" (105). McIntyre employs metaphors of femininity in *The Great War Continues*, where the faces of women

posing for formal portraits are obscured by oversized flowers. In *The fallacy of trying to isolate on thing from another* women's bodies are replaced, or overtaken, by individual articles of feminine attire.

How women's bodies communicate symbolic meaning is an ongoing issue in the art of Alice Maher; she works with subjects such as tears and women's hair to explore how materials such as these function in ancient myth and in the rituals of life. Referring to *Ombre* (1997), a large charcoal drawing featuring a mane of long brown hair, Maher comments,

Having your hair cut off was also a way of teaching someone a lesson, of making someone grow up. It's also about country girls coming to town, about sexuality and growing up, about fashion and the sign of virginity. It's about even ripping it out in moments of extreme emotion.... and in lots of cultures the unbound hair signifies the wild side of sexual ecstasy (129).

Artist Rita Duffy approaches the politics of identity from a specifically Irish perspective. Speaking of *Gneas* (1996), a humorous painting featuring a green brassiere, Duffy says she wanted to "create a new, sexy symbol of Irishness, a new notion of being Irish and being female" (47-48). Political commentary trumps humor in Duffy's sculpture *Dessert* (2001; Fig. 1), where a Kalashnikov rifle cast in chocolate rests on a crisp damask linen tablecloth decorated with traditional Celtic patterning. Says Duffy,

The idea for the piece was to show very clearly the whole romantic element between the male hero and the female hero-worshipper. ... I think about how young men are conditioned into a culture of violence. Why do we do this to young men? I think violence is often seen as incredibly sexy.... As an artist I believe it is important to

make work that is of a time and place. *Dessert* is very defiantly of my time (53).

The influence of feminist psychoanalytic theory, which inspired much art and criticism during the 1990s and today, is evident throughout *Dialogues*. Frances Hegarty's *Turas* (1995), for example, draws on Lacanian notions of the passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic in video footage showing the artist attempting to learn Gaelic from her mother. In this piece Hegarty links the idea of separation from Ireland (the motherland) through emigration and colonization, with the traumatic loss of Ireland's "mother tongue, Gaelic" (62).

Artist Susan MacWilliam discusses her works devoted to women from history who were categorized in their own times as materialization mediums, witches, or hysterics. *Experiment M* (1999) for example focuses on the materialization medium Kathleen Goligher (b. 1898), while the slide installation *Faint* (1999), showing MacWilliam collapsed on the ground, is inspired by Charcot's nineteenth-century asylum photographs of hysterics. For MacWilliam the faint is "regarded as a classic symptom of hysteria and madness" and in this piece the "faint itself is presented as the pivotal action which demands attention" (120).

The delicate psychological balance involved in a daughter's negotiation of the relationship with her mother is the subject of Sandra Johnston's *Gaining Distance* (1999), which deals with the subject of the acquisition of "normal" gender attributes, and one's ability to maintain "neutrality" while living in the midst of the violence of Belfast. Speaking of this performance piece the artists says, "I am dressing up for this hypothetical discussion that I am having with my mother. I am putting on the clothes which represent what she wants me to be" (81). Dressed femininely for her mother's approval, but with hair cropped too short to be considered properly feminine, in this performance

Johnston attempts the impossible: she rests her forehead on a small stone on the ground and tries to balance the weight of her body on it (81).

Many audiences will find *Dialogues* useful. By her astute questioning, Deepwell has accomplished her goal of opening up a broader understanding of the sixteen artists, their works, and their country during the 1990s. Artists and studio faculty will appreciate this presentation of the voices of artists engaged in critical discussion about their work. Critics, curators, and art historians will appreciate the book's presentation of contemporary artists doing important work. Significantly, *Dialogues* presents a model of a new kind of art criticism, one which strives to recalibrate the dynamic of the relationship between artist and critics. •

Patricia Briggs is Assistant Professor of Liberal Arts at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. She writes art criticism for *Artforum International*, *Art Papers*, and *Art on Paper* and her article "Matisse's Odalisques and the Photographic Académie" is forthcoming in *History of Photography*.

NOTES

1. See also Katy Deepwell, *Ten Decades: The Careers of Ten Women Artists born 1897-1906* (1992); *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (1995); *Africa and Art Criticism: Nigeria, Zimbabwe & South Africa* (1997). *New Feminist Art Criticism: Critical Strategies* (1995). With co-editor Mila Bredikhina, *A Russian Reader on Feminist Art Theory* is forthcoming.
2. *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal*, founded by Deepwell in 1996, is an online and print journal devoted to feminist theory and contemporary women's art practice which takes an explicitly international view.
3. Parker and Pollock distinguished between "practical strategies and strategic practices." See Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (London & New York, Pandora, 1987), 3; quoted in Deepwell *New Feminist Art Criticism*, 1.



Pl. 1. Alice Neel, *Cindy Nemser and Chuck* (1975), oil on canvas, 41 1/2" x 29 3/4".
© Estate of Alice Neel, Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York.



Pl. 2. Alice Neel, *Linda Nochlin and Daisy* (1973), oil on canvas, 55 7/8" x 44".
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Photo: ©2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Seth K. Sweetser Fund, 1983.496.

Pl. 3. Alice Neel, *Self Portrait* (1980),
oil on canvas, 53 1/4" x 39 3/4",
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution,
© Estate of Alice Neel, 1980.



Pl. 4. Alice Neel,
Two Girls, Spanish Harlem (1959),
oil on canvas, 30" X 25".
©Estate of Alice Neel.
Private Collection.



Pl. 5. Alice Neel, *Ethel Ashton* (1930), oil on canvas, 24" x 22". ©Estate of Alice Neel.

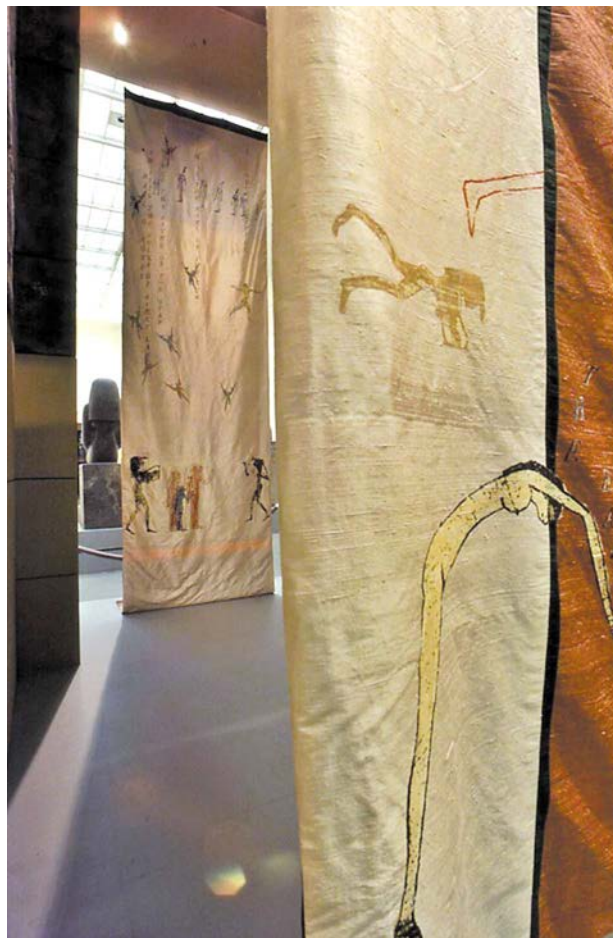


Pl. 6. Miriam Schapiro and Sherry Brody, *The Dollhouse* (1972), wood and mixed media, 79 3/4" x 82" x 8 1/2".
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Gene Davis Memorial Fund.

Pl. 7. Nancy Spero, *Hymn to Isis, Koptos Gateway Banners* (2003), two hand-printed silk banners, 133" x 43" and 135" x 63." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy the Artist and Galerie Lelong, NY, L-R 11.2005. Photo: 2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



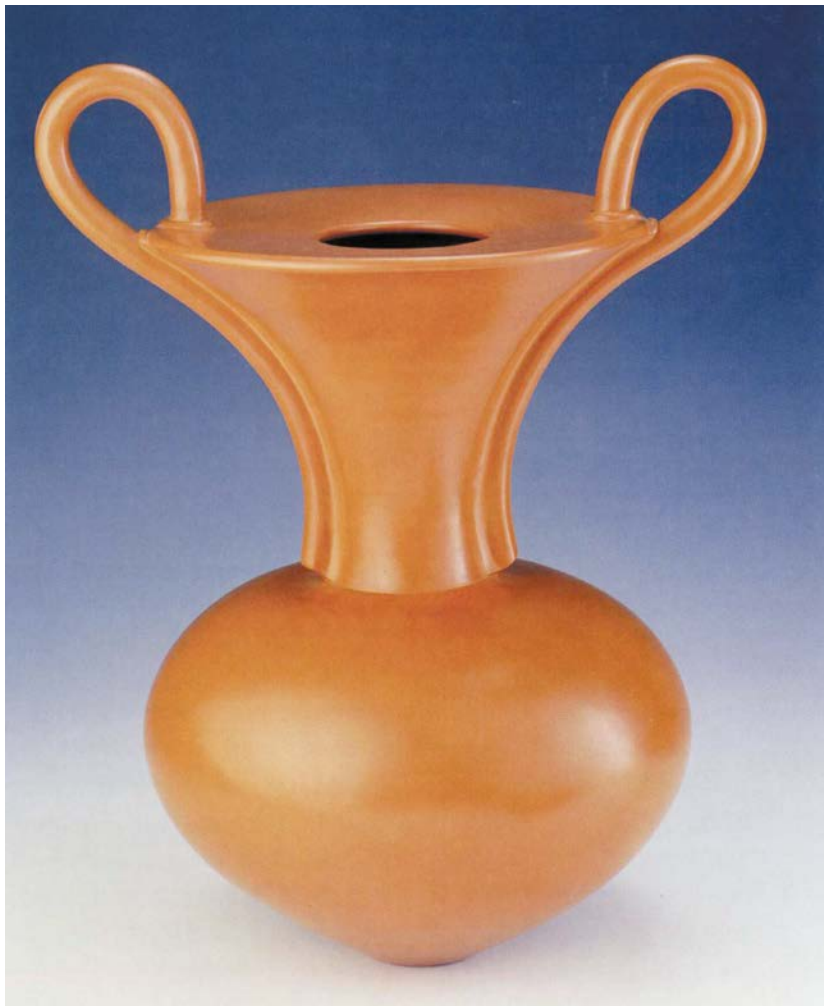
Pl. 8. Nancy Spero, *Hymn to Isis, Koptos Gateway Banners* (2003), two hand-printed silk banners, 133" x 43" and 135" x 63." Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Courtesy the Artist and Galerie Lelong, NY, L-R 12.2005. Photo: 2006, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



Pl. 9. Nancy Spero,
Hymn to Isis,
Koptos Gateway Banners (2003),
two hand-printed silk banners,
133" x 43" and 135" x 63."
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
Courtesy the Artist and Galerie
Lelong, NY, L-R 11.2005.
Photo: 2006, Museum of Fine
Arts, Boston.



Pl. 10. Nancy Spero, *A Cycle in Time* (1995), hand-printed silk banner, 168' x 30."
(Installation at Residenzgalerie, Salzburg, Austria.) Collection of the artist. Photo: Ulrich Ghezzi.



Pl. 11. Magdalene Odundo, *Untitled* (1989), burnished and oxidized terracotta, 16 1/4" x 13 1/8". Jonathan Lynch/Lakeland Trust, Weltkunst Foundation.



Pl. 12. Bonnie Ntshalinshali, *The Last Supper* (1990), 20 1/2 x 12 1/2 x 21 1/2", painted ceramic, Standard Bank Corporate Collection, Johannesburg.